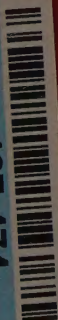


HALF A CLUE

J. RUSSELL
WARREN



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HALF A CLUE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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BY

J. RUSSELL WARREN

Author of "Castle Enigma," etc.

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HALF A CLUE.

I

WHEN Terry Rattigan read this account I have written of the extraordinary affair in which we both took part, he exclaimed :

“ Holy Smoke, skipper, do you realise that none of it would have happened if on that first evening you'd had half-a-crown in your pocket ? ”

And it is true. But for that trivial thing, poor Cecil Lorimer would certainly not have been found till morning, the men who were hounding him would have got intact the message he wrote to me, and I should have known nothing of it, and—well, many things would be very different for some people in England to-day.

I had dined at my club, the British Dependencies, met a couple of fellows whom I had not seen since I left England five years before, and sat yarning with them till after eleven o'clock. Then I went back to my Kensington flat. As I was still rather shaky after malaria, I ran to the small extravagance of a taxi.

I remember that the clock of St. Mary Abbot's church was striking the half-hour as we ran between the open iron gates into the courtyard of Gardens Mansions and up to the far corner in which was the doorway that

led to my flat. I stepped out and dived a hand into my pocket for some money to pay the man. I found that I had no silver—only a few coppers, and some notes in my note-case. The taxi-driver had no change. (When you consider that most of their fares are certainly paid in silver, it is inexplicable how seldom taximen have change when you want it.)

“Look here,” I said, pointing back to the doorway at the outer end of the courtyard, “there ought to be a porter there. Cut across and ask him if he has any change.”

Rather sulkily, I thought, he climbed down out of his driving seat and clumped across the dark courtyard. I saw him standing at the door, his hand on the knob, peering through the glass, and then staring blankly about him. At last he shrugged his shoulders and came back.

“No porter there, guv’nor,” he said, in a hoarse and husky voice. “And the door’s locked and all the lights out. Gone off duty, I reckon.”

“Oh,” I said rather blankly. I had only moved into my flat that day, and had not yet learnt the manners and customs of the porters, nor the rules and regulations that governed Gardens Mansions. I had not noticed that all the entrance halls were in darkness. “Well, I know I’ve got some silver in my flat. You’d better come up.”

He looked at me, unwillingness in every line of him.

“I’ve also got some pretty good whisky,” I added, “if that’s any use to you.”

He brightened considerably at that.

"Thanks, guv'nor," he said. "I don't usually take nothing, not when I'm driving, but I'm knocking off for the day now, anyway, so——"

"Come on, then," I said, and he followed me to the door. It was locked, but I had been told that my flat key would open it, which proved to be true. We entered, leaving the door open. The staircase well was as dark as Tophet—I learnt later that it was a regulation in the Mansions that all hall and staircase lights should be switched off at eleven o'clock—and side by side we stumbled, my taximan and I, up the five flights of steep stone stairs; my flat was on the top floor, and Gardens Mansions has no lifts.

In my then state of health I found the stairs more trying than I had expected, and before we reached the top my taximan was puffing and blowing like a grampus—they must get shockingly out of condition, these fellows, sitting at a wheel all day. On the top landing, as I wriggled the key into my front door, he pushed back his cap, mopped his forehead, and said:

"Blime, guv'nor, you don't 'alf like living near 'eaven!"

I switched on the light, led him into my tiny sitting-room, and mixed him a whisky-peg. I went into my bedroom, found some silver in the trousers I had been wearing during the day, went back and paid him, adding what I hoped was an adequate tip. At any rate, he seemed quite content as he stowed the coins

away somewhere beneath his many layers of clothing. His early sulkiness seemed to have melted, and he looked really quite a pleasant fellow, with a shrewd, weather-beaten face, a humorous mouth, and alert little grey eyes. He lifted his glass, nodded at me over the rim of it, said "Good 'elf, sir," and poured the contents straight down his throat. Then I let him out on to the landing.

He stood there a moment, winding a muffler round his neck—I don't know why, because even to me the autumn evening was not cold. From below, through the open doorway and echoing up the staircase well, we could hear the faint grumbling of his engine.

"Well, good-night, sir," he said affably, and started to descend the stairs, while I began to shut my front door. But before I had quite closed it his hoarse whisper, with a new and arresting quality in it, stopped me.

"'Alf a mo', guv'nor," he entreated. "I fink there's somefink wrong down 'ere."

I went out to him. He stood half-way down the top flight of stairs, flooded by the light from my open door, and pointed downward into the well of profound blackness below.

"I heard a funny sort o' noise," he explained; "a kind of a gasp and a groan and a slithery sort o' sound. I don't like it, sir."

I bent over the banister rail and peered downward, listening. I could hear a very, very faint sound, as of heavy breathing, and a slight rustling, rising out of the darkness.

"I expect it's only some fellow come home blotto," I told him. "But if you *do* find

anything wrong—anybody ill or anything—as you go down, give me a hail.”

He hesitated a moment.

“If I was to trip on these here stairs,” he mused, “I wouldn’t ’alf go a cosh.”

Then, with a kind of diving movement, as if he were nerving himself to an ordeal, he plunged down the stairs. I went into the flat and shut the door, turned into the sitting-room and mixed myself a nightcap.

I had barely lifted the glass to my lips when I heard his heavy footsteps clumping hurriedly, unsteadily, up the stairs: the noise rang and echoed in the hollow well. I had the door open before he could knock or ring. On his weatherbeaten face I saw alarm and uneasiness.

“There’s a bloke ill down there, sir,” he said. “On one o’ the landings. He ain’t boozed; he’s ill. Will you give me an ’and?”

“Just a minute,” I said. “It’s dark down there. I’ll get a torch.”

I fished an electric flashlamp out of a drawer in the bureau, and with its little white disc of light jogging about before us we went down the stairs.

We reached the second-floor landing, and my taximan clutched my arm.

“Here, sir; just here against the wall.”

I swept the ray of light along the black and white tiles, and it suddenly ran up over a rumpled cloth surface and the unmistakable knuckles of a man’s hand. I bent over the huddled figure, moving the light of the torch to and fro. The man was lying more or less on his face, but even so I began to recognise

something familiar about his general appearance. Gently I turned him over, flashed the light on to the thin, pale face, with the spectacles awry on the nose, and found myself looking, in shocked and horrified amazement, into the staring, sightless eyes of Cecil Lorimer.

He was dead: I have had too much experience to be mistaken. The awed, hushed voice of the taximan whispered at my elbow:

"Is he—gone, sir?"

I nodded. He looked round the landing.

"Blime. Wonder which o' these rabbit-holes he lives in."

"He's a friend of mine," I said. "He must have been coming to see me and been taken ill. Give me a hand to carry him upstairs, there's a good chap."

He responded quite willingly. Between us we lifted all that was left on earth of the man who had been my closest friend, and carried it up the stairs toward the golden light that gleamed like a beacon above.

We laid the poor limp thing on the sofa in the sitting-room and stood back, looking down at it, I in sorrowful regret, the taximan in awed compassion.

"He hadn't quite gone when I found him, sir," he said, his hoarse voice sunk lower than ever, "he was still breathing a bit."

I nodded.

"I suppose," I said, "I'd better get hold of a doctor. You don't know of one near at hand, do you?"

He shook his head.

"No, sir, I can't say I do. But I'll go out

and look for a brass plate. I bet there's plenty round here."

"No, never mind," I said; "I'll ring up and ask the exchange."

I crossed the room to the telephone. The night operator was slow, and I rattled the hook impatiently several times before a man's voice growled "Number, please."

"Look here," I said, "can you put me through to a doctor? I'm a stranger here and don't know one, but I want one immediately——"

"Just a minute," said the voice.

I waited many minutes, while the line buzzed and clicked and faint murmurs of conversation drifted along it, and then at last a crisp voice said "Yes?"

"Are you a doctor?" I asked.

"Doctor Prendergast."

"My name's Carmichael—Captain Carmichael, of 73, Gardens Mansions. I've just found a friend of mine dead on the stairs here. Could you come round?"

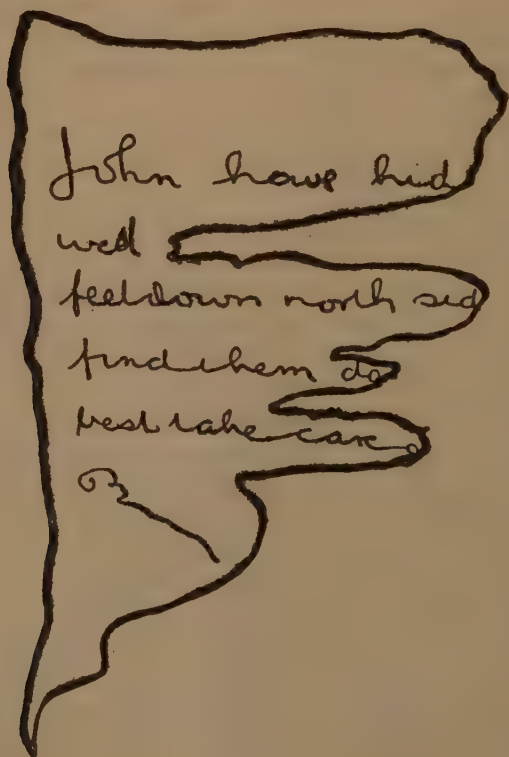
"I'll be round in five minutes."

"Thank you," I said, and hung up the receiver. I turned. I saw that the taximan, still standing awkwardly near the door, was pointing with a stubby forefinger.

"Look, sir," he said. "See that? He's got a letter or something in his hand."

I looked. One of Lorimer's arms hung over the edge of the sofa, the hand touching the floor, and the limp, delicate fingers still clung to a crumpled bit of paper. Dropping on one knee I detached it gently and smoothed it out. My own handwriting jumped to my

glance. It was a torn sheet of the letter I had written to Cecil the previous day. I turned it over, and then stared. On the reverse side were scrawled uneven, sprawling pencilled characters, bearing only a faint resemblance to Lorimer's habitually neat, delicate writing. And the first word was my own Christian name. The whole read :



I stared at the message in amazement. It was, I had no doubt, intended for me; it looked as if Cecil, taken ill as he climbed the stairs, had tried to write me a note before he lost consciousness. That, perhaps, was not an unnatural thing for him to do, but the words in the message were extraordinary, melodramatic, utterly unlike the man; they read more like an extract from a cheap "thriller." I realised, too, in a flash of thought, that he must have come up from Cornwall by nearly, if not quite, the first train he could catch after receiving my letter, and come on to the flat almost immediately. There was a suggestion of haste, of urgency, about it all that was unlike him; a hint of something extraordinarily important that he wanted to tell me. I could not understand it, and this fragmentary message only bewildered instead of enlightening me.

I looked at it again. Quite obviously only part of the message was there; the paper must have been torn in half after he had written the note—either as he collapsed or as we lifted him—and the missing piece must be lying somewhere on the landing where he had fallen.

I put the paper carefully in my pocket and turned to the taximan, who had been looking over my shoulder with eager curiosity, trying to read the note without appearing to do so.

"Look here," I said, "do you mind staying here while I go downstairs?" I felt a distaste to leaving poor Cecil alone. "This is a note he has written to me, but it's got torn, somehow.

The other piece ought to be down there somewhere, and I must find it."

"Right-oh, sir, I'll stay," he said cheerfully. "Bless you, I ain't afraid of *him*. He can't do me no harm, poor gent."

I went down the dark stairs again to the second landing, and by the light of my torch began to search carefully. I found Lorimer's hat, his gloves and heavy stick—things I had left unnoticed in the shock of finding him and the business of carrying him upstairs—also his pocket-book and two or three scattered letters—turned out of his pockets, I supposed, as his groping fingers searched shakily, desperately, for pencil and paper to write that last note. But nowhere on the black and white tiles was there any sign of the missing fragment.

It might, of course, have fluttered away between the banister rails and down on to a lower flight, or to the basement bottom of the staircase well. I went on downward, spraying the stairs with light, down past the open front door, beyond which the taxicab still throbbed in the courtyard, to the basement hall, and began to search there.

II

AFTER a very little while the sound of brisk footsteps above interrupted me, advancing up the courtyard, across the little

bridge that spanned the passage running round the basement flats, to the door. I ran up the stairs to the ground floor. A tall, overcoated figure stood in the doorway.

"Doctor Prendergast?" I asked.

"Yes. Are you Captain Carmichael?"

"Yes. Very good of you to come so quickly at this time of night. Will you come up? My flat's at the top."

As we ascended the stairs I explained the circumstances in which I had found Cecil. At the landing I paused, pointed out the spot where he had lain, and stooped to pick up poor Lorimer's scattered belongings. Prendergast helped me, and we went on upward toward the light above.

Entering my sitting-room, he went straight to the sofa, bent over the body, and examined it very carefully. Then he rose and turned to me.

"You realise that he's dead."

I nodded.

"He was practically—gone—when I found him. What do you think——"

"Oh, heart, so far as I can tell. A friend of yours, you say. Do you happen to know if he suffered from heart trouble?"

"Yes. Ever since I've known him."

"Ah. Yes, that's it, without a doubt. But there'll have to be an inquest, you know."

"Yes . . . I suppose so."

"We'll have to have . . . him . . . moved to the mortuary, and the police will have to be notified. I'll ring them up."

For the first time he seemed to notice

the taximan, and his eyebrows went up interrogatively. I explained the reason of his presence. Prendergast nodded.

"He'd better stay till the police come: they'll want his evidence at the inquest." He shot a keen glance at me.

"I'll ring them up," I volunteered.

"No, I will. I know some of them."

He went to the telephone. This time, apparently, the exchange answered quickly, for in a few moments he said "Police," and then, almost instantly: "Doctor Prendergast speaking. Will you send somebody round to 73, Gardens Mansions? Man found dead on the stairs . . . Oh, no. Natural causes, certainly. But we'll want the ambulance, to go to the mortuary . . . What? Right."

He hung up the receiver and turned to me.

"Somebody will be round in a few minutes. I'll stay with you."

"Thanks," I said. "Sit down, and have a peg. I'd just poured myself out one, as a matter of fact, when . . . this happened."

He sat down in one of the leather-covered armchairs, a neat, very clean-looking, youngish man, with a large pink face, carefully parted fair hair and a manner of conscious competence.

"Very sad, this," he said, sipping the very diluted whisky he had taken. "You never know, with these cases, any little thing . . . shock; or excitement . . . even these stairs, if he's not used to them . . . Had you seen him recently?"

I shook my head.

"I've been out in Kenya the last five years ; in the Administration. Was invalided out with malaria. Only landed the day before yesterday."

He smiled in a self-gratified way.

"I guessed something of the sort, naturally. You've got it written all over you." This was not particularly clever of him for I was as lean as a rake, then, and as yellow as the proverbial guinea. "You want to take care of yourself. This has shaken you up a bit, I think."

"It has," I admitted dryly.

We heard heavy footsteps echoing on the stairs. I rose, went to the front door and opened it, flooding the top of the stairway with light. I waited on the landing, and an inspector and a constable came bulkily up the stairs.

"'Evening, sir," the inspector said, seeing me. "Doctor Prendergast here?"

"Come in, inspector," I said.

He marched into the sitting-room, greeted Prendergast, and looked down at the sofa. His bushy eyebrows went up. Prendergast shook his head.

"Nothing exciting, I'm afraid, Inspector Jervis. Just plain heart failure. But I thought you'd better be notified, and we'll want the ambulance."

"Quite so, doctor." The inspector ran a swift, interrogative glance over me. He was a heavily built man, with a square, obstinate jaw, a nose like a mutton chop, curiously hard, opaque eyes, and a sergeant-majorish,

don't-you-dare-to-try-any-tricks-on-me-my-lad manner that I did not care for.

"This is Captain Carmichael, of the Kenya Administration," Prendergast explained, accepting responsibility for me with a tact that I appreciated. "He found the deceased on the stairs, brought him up here, and rang me up. The deceased was a friend of his, and was apparently coming to see him."

The inspector shot a quick glance at me.

"Bit late for a call, wasn't it?" he challenged suspiciously.

His manner rubbed me up the wrong way.

"Not considering that we hadn't met for five years, and that he must have come straight up from Cornwall to-day specially to see me."

His busy eyebrows went up.

"From Cornwall?" He dived into a pocket and produced a bulky notebook. "If you'll give me any particulars you can about the deceased: his name . . ."

"Cecil Lorimer."

He wrote it down, spelling it aloud.

"Age?"

"Let me see, he was about ten years older than myself: say forty-five."

"Occupation?"

"He was a scientist. I suppose you would call him an experimental or analytical chemist, that kind of thing."

I saw that he wrote down "chemist."

"Address?"

"Trewerry House, Roseveare, near Redruth."

"You're sure that's where he was last?"

"He must have been there this morning."

The last letter I had from him was written two months ago. I received it just before I left Mombasa. But I wrote to him at Roseveare yesterday, giving him this address—I only came here this morning, you understand—so—Well, he must have been there and received the letter, or he wouldn't have known where to find me."

"What was he doing down there?"

"So far as I know, carrying out some experiments in connection with tin-smelting."

"H'm. You don't know where he was putting up in London?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I don't know if there's anything in his pockets . . . I haven't been through them. . . ."

I indicated a little heap on the table, the oddments that I had picked up from the landing. He went through them eagerly. There was nothing but one or two letters, including a torn part of the one I had written him, and business communications from chemical manufacturers; a few trifling bills; one or two slips of paper bearing pencil jottings that appeared to be chemical formulæ. The pocket-book contained nothing but a few visiting cards, some one-pound notes, and a photograph of a little girl.

"Hullo," said the inspector and stared hard at it.

"That," I said, "is a photograph of his daughter, Brenda, when she was a child."

He nodded comprehendingly.

"She's grown up now, I take it?"

"She'll be about twenty."

"H'm. Is she his next of kin? Has he a wife?"

I shook my head. I saw no necessity to explain that poor Cecil had, at the age of twenty-four, married quite the wrong woman, who, after leading him a devil-dance for five years, had gone off with a Russian Pole or some such animal.

"H'm. We'll have to notify her. Will she be down in Cornwall, or will she have come up to London with him?"

"I really can't say: I've no idea."

"Well, I'll get through to the Redruth police and tell them to send somebody out to this Roseveare place. Unless—you haven't been through his pockets, you said?"

He did so promptly, but found nothing but Lorimer's watch, a bunch of keys, and some odd silver and coppers.

"H'm. Nothing informative there. Well" He cast an appraising glance at my taximan, who was fidgeting restlessly. "Gimme your name and address and you can go. I shall want you for the inquest."

The taximan looked relieved and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Bert Small," he said, in his husky voice. "Number Fifteen, Mayday Road, Brixton."

The inspector wrote it down.

"Right," he said. "You can go."

As the taximan, with a husky "Good-night, gentlemen," went away, the inspector said: "Mind if I use your 'phone, sir?" and scarcely waiting for permission, he went to the instrument

and rang up for an ambulance, rang up the mortuary, and put through a trunk call to Redruth.

Doctor Prendergast began to button up his overcoat.

"You won't want me any more to-night, will you, inspector?" he asked.

"No, sir, no. You'll be notified about the inquest."

Prendergast nodded, said "good-night" to us and went out; brisk and consciously capable. As I stood at my open door, lighting the staircase for him, I heard him assuring people—presumably tenants of the other flats—that nothing was the matter and they could go back to bed.

"Have a peg, inspector?" I invited. I had not taken any kind of fancy to the man, but hospitality is a duty, especially to one who has lived in the East. "And you too, constable."

The inspector flicked a glance at the constable, standing stolidly against the wall.

"No, thanks, sir; not while I'm on duty."

Apparently his refusal included the constable.

"Well, sit down, anyway," I said—a trifle testily, I'm afraid, for my nerves were raw.

"And have a smoke."

They complied, somewhat awkwardly, and took the cigarettes I offered them. We sat for a little while in silence. I had no desire to talk, and apparently the inspector had nothing to say, but I saw that his curiously opaque eyes were summing me up, and taking in every detail of the sitting-room.

Once or twice I wondered if I should mention that curious fragment of paper I had found in Lorimer's dead hand, but something—I think it was principally the antipathy toward the inspector that I could not avoid feeling, and a fear of inviting humiliating ridicule—restrained me.

"By the way," I said at last, breaking the silence, "those things of . . . his—" I nodded towards the table—"will you want to take charge of them? If not . . . I believe I'm his sole executor, under his will. . . ."

The inspector eyed the oddments thoughtfully.

"Why, no, sir. They're not of any importance. If the deceased had been found in a public place, or if a crime had been committed . . . No, sir, I may as well leave them with you."

At that moment the telephone bell rang. He answered it, and in a few moments was presumably talking to the Redruth police.

"Lorimer," I heard him say. "L-o-r-i-m-e-r. Trewerry House, Roseveare. . . . Yes, that's right. . . . Oh, you do. . . . Well, he's died suddenly here in London. . . . I want you to send a man out to this Trewerry House to notify Miss Lorimer, if she's there. . . . No, we don't quite know. . . . If she came up to London we don't know where she is. . . . No, not at once. . . . First thing in the morning. . . . Right. G'bye."

He had hardly put down the receiver when we heard the throbbing and grinding of a motor-engine down in the courtyard; in the night

silence it came echoing with eerie hollowness up the dark staircase well.

"That'll be the ambulance," said the constable, and went downstairs. The inspector and I sat waiting. Presently we heard footsteps on the stairs; men came in and carried away the body of my oldest friend—carried it past, I was sure, the gaping gaze of eyes peering from doorways all down the stairs. The inspector got up and followed.

"You'll be wanted at the inquest, of course, sir," he said at the door. "The coroner's officer will notify you. It'll be as soon as conveniently possible. You'd like that, I expect, and there's no reason for delay. As soon as we get into touch with Miss Lorimer. Good-night, sir."

III

I WATCHED him go stolidly down the stairs, and turned back into my sitting-room. I had taken possession of the flat so light-heartedly, full of an anticipation and purpose that I had not known for many weeks—for the Blue, Blue Hump, as anyone who knows will tell you, is as much a symptom of malaria as an incredible temperature and the shivery-shakes. Now everything seemed clouded again; and I was paralysed by that stultifying feeling that nothing was worth while.

I looked at the things on the table, the trifling personal oddments that half an hour

before had been in Lorimer's pockets : I looked at his hat and gloves and heavy stick, lying on a chair. We had had little in common—ours had been one of those odd friendships of utterly contrasted temperaments—but I had been really fond of him. There was a difference of age and a difference in tastes ; he had been what at school we called a "swotter," always buried in books, with a special kink towards science in general and chemistry in particular, things that it gave me a headache to try and understand ; he had been a rabbit at games—his weak heart and weak sight were against him. But I had a hearty awe of his profound knowledge ; I felt, I think, something of the protective instinct of a strong big boy for a weak little one ; and I had the greatest admiration for his character. He was a white man, if ever there was one ; white clean through. Our odd friendship had endured over five years, and several thousand miles, of separation ; indeed he was almost the only person at home I had really kept in touch with all the time. Only a few days before I sailed I had had a ten-page letter from him, all about the experiments he was carrying out in Cornwall. I did not know what half of it meant, and much was written in hieroglyphics that only a scientist could understand, but to no one but me would the reticent little man have written at such length and in such detail. I had looked forward to coming home and seeing him and hearing him talk enthusiastically about it all. And now. . . .

I am not ashamed to confess that for a few

moments the little sitting-room swam mistily before my eyes.

Then my mind went back to that last note of his. I took the fragment of paper out of my pocket and read it again and again, trying to fathom its meaning. I could not. Without the missing half, it was utterly unintelligible. "John, have hid . . . well . . . feet down . . . north side . . . find them do . . . best take care. . . ." The last word was undecipherable, a mere scrawl as the pencil fell from his fingers. The letter conveyed nothing, yet I knew, I felt, that it was a message of the gravest, most urgent importance, though I could not guess at its purport; it was a last desperate call for help, in the simple, childlike faith that I would not fail him. I must find that missing half: I simply must.

I rose, took my flashlamp, and went down the staircase again, hunting over every inch of stairs and landing and the basement hall; I even made search in the courtyard and the basement passages. It seemed inexplicable, incredible, but I found nothing, and at last I gave up the search, climbed those stairs again and went to bed.

IV

WITH so much to distress and perplex me, I did not expect to sleep, but actually I was dog-tired, tired in body and

brain and nerves. I fell asleep almost as soon as my head had touched the pillow.

I do not know how long I slept, or what woke me; whether it was a noise, or some subconscious instinct. I am by habit a light sleeper, with a trick of waking instantly, and that night I quite suddenly found myself broad awake, listening to faint, only just audible sounds that came from somewhere within the flat.

I was out of bed in an instant, across the little room, and silently opening the door. I listened intently. The sounds came from my sitting-room, along the passage. Its door was open, and through the doorway, flickering about the passage floor, came the fitful white reflection of a flashlamp's beam.

I tiptoed along the passage and peered round the door jamb into the sitting-room. It was pitch dark, and I could see nothing at first but that moving ray of white light, travelling about the room, resting for a moment here and there, and then passing on. Then I was able to make out a dark figure behind it; small, slight, vague.

I waited, curious to see what the intruder would do. But luck was against me. What warned him I do not know. I am positive that I made no sound: I was holding my breath, though with some difficulty. I think the fellow must have felt that subtle, subconscious knowledge of another presence, of being watched, that most of us experience at times, and to which I am particularly sensitive. At any rate, the light suddenly swung round

toward me, rested on the door jamb for a second, and then, before I had time either to withdraw or advance, flashed into my eyes, dazzling me.

Before I could recover from my momentary blindness there was a sound of a rush across the room, away from me and toward the window. Still blinking, I lunged in pursuit, and cannoned into the table. (I remember reflecting, in that instant, that if I had been really familiar with the flat I should have avoided that table instinctively.) As I disentangled myself I saw that the window was wide open at the bottom—certainly I had not left it so—and that a small, slight figure, faintly black in the framing of the aperture, was climbing out. I started forward, and he disappeared. By the time I had reached the window and was leaning out he was ten feet below, sliding and slithering down a rainpipe, and going fast.

I could not follow him: I am fairly agile, but monkey-climbing about the sides of buildings is not one of my accomplishments. To shout would have been futile; there was nobody about below to stop the fellow, and if the noise I made awoke any of the denizens of the flats, the fugitive would be at the other side of London before they had finished asking each other what was the matter. I did, I think, the only possible, if not very hopeful, thing; I tried to get downstairs and cut him off in the warren of basement passages.

I bounded down the first flight, one hand on the banister rail, and then something about that rail percolated to the proper cells in my

brain. Apparently it ran, smooth and uninterrupted by knobs or newel posts, from top to bottom. I swung my leg over it and went sliding down through the darkness at speed, as I had done many times as a boy at home, but certainly never since. As I went, my mind was quaintly divided between two thoughts—a reflection that I must get off at the ground floor, since the door leading out of the basement level was locked, and a subconscious and irresistible wonder as to whether the friction of my rapid descent would set my thin tropical pyjama trousers on fire.

As I had decided, I swung off the banisters at the ground floor and ran through the open door into the courtyard. I remembered that at the street end there were steps leading down into the basement passage, and I made for them, sprinting barefoot across the hard asphalt. I took the steps at a bound, landed badly at the bottom with a smack that stung the soles of my feet, and, losing my balance, cannoned into the wall.

I was quite in the dark as to which way my burglar would have gone when he reached the ground, but I guessed that the basement passage in which I was ran all round the courtyard, round to the backs of the flats, and also burrowed through a sort of tunnel into the other courtyard and so out into Church Street. That, I thought, was the way my man would have gone, and I pelted for the tunnel, uncertain whether I should be in time to intercept the fellow or whether I were merely pursuing him more or less futilely.

Either it was the latter, or he had chosen to escape in some other way, for when I came out of the tunnel and raced up the steps into the other courtyard, it was deserted and silent. I went as far as the gates and looked up and down dark and empty Church Street, but I saw no sign, heard no sound, of my quarry.

There was, of course, just a chance that he might be hiding in a corner, waiting for a chance to slip past me. If so, I stood precious little chance of catching him, for in a game of hide-and-seek round those passages the hare would have a thousand chances against a singleton hound. Still, I had a faint hope that I might start him up and get another run, at any rate, so I went back and prowled through all the passages. I was determined to let slip no chance of finding him, but my enthusiasm was beginning to wane. In spite of the pace I was going, the night air struck chilly through my tropical pyjamas, and though I was not worried about the risk of my man having a weapon, I experienced that unpleasant sensation of inferiority which a barefoot man feels when tackling a fellow with shoes on.

But it did not come to a tackle. All the passages were silent and empty. My man had gone. Satisfied of this, I went to the gates and looked up and down the little side street to see if a policeman were within sight. Needless to say, there was not. The only thing was to go back to the flat, ring up my friend the the inspector, and tell him about my nocturnal visitor.

As once more I climbed the stairs I wondered how the fellow had got into the flat. I had not bolted the door—people accustomed to living largely in tents do not bother much about bolts—but the lock was of a pattern that is not supposed to open to any key but the particular one made for it. An examination of the door showed that this kind of lock is not so burglar-proof as a trusting public would believe. A deft lockpicker, equipped with a pair of tweezers of suitable pattern, can withdraw the entire barrel of the lock complete, a deft turn or two disengaging the tumblers and pulling back the catch. This my friend had obviously done, for the said barrel lay upon the tiles of the landing.

I telephoned again to the police-station and asked for the inspector. In a few moments his unmistakable voice answered.

“Sorry to bother you again, inspector,” I said, “but this seems to be a busy night here. I’ve had a burglar. He got away, but I thought you’d better know about it at once.”

“I’ll come round,” he said—a shade wearily, I thought.

While I waited for him I inspected the sitting-room. I imagine that I disturbed my visitor almost as soon as he had entered, for I saw no sign of anything having been touched except those things of Lorimer’s that I had left lying on the table. The letters and papers were strewn about, one or two had fallen to the floor—though I might have shaken those off when I cannoned into the table in the

darkness—and the money was gone. I could not see that anything else was missing, not even the watch.

In a very few minutes the inspector, attended by the same constable as before, arrived. I went to meet him, and found him examining the door.

"Looks like Monkey Ted's work," he said to the constable, who nodded agreement.

They came into the flat.

"Did he get anything?" the inspector asked, staring at me with his hard eyes.

"Only the money that was on the table: Lorimer's money. I think I disturbed him before he had a chance to look for anything else."

He brought out his notebook, and I gave him a description of the affair. The idea of my sliding down the banisters and chasing the burglar, barefoot and pyjamaed, through the passages seemed to tickle him, for though his manner remained severely official, I saw a sardonic twinkle in his eyes.

"Window open, you say?" he asked as he jotted down his notes. "And got away down the rainpipe? Monkey Ted, for a cert. We find, you know, that the regular criminal almost always is a creature of habit. He goes after the same kind of things every time; he works on the same lines every time; he leaves his trade-mark on every job he does. There are burglars who never touch any food in the house; there are others who always raid the larder and have a meal; there's one who invariably washes up the crockery he's used.

He's been caught, over and over again, because of that bit of polite consideration, but he goes on doing it. It's the amateur crook, of no known habits, who's difficult to trace, if he's left no definite clues behind to give him away. These signs here—barrel pulled out of the lock, window opened immediately for a get-away, shinning down the rainpipe, are the trade-marks of Monkey Ted, whose special happy hunting-ground is flats. We'll get him all right. The Yard know his haunts; they'll find him and ask him to account for his movements to-night. Unless he can weigh in with a cast-iron alibi, he's for it."

I nodded. All this seemed reasonable. I had an inward feeling of dissatisfaction, a sense that the burglary had some connection with Lorimer, but it was too vague to voice against the scornful incredulity which the inspector would show.

"Odd," I ventured; "two such happenings here, on one night. . . ."

He considered this.

"Oh, well, I should say"—he puckered up his eyes and looked judicial—"that Ted heard that the flat was let and that you'd moved in. He'd reckon that you had things lying about that you hadn't had time to put away; easy pickings. If he was watching the place, and saw anything of the previous business, he'd say to himself that you'd be dead tired and would sleep sound. An easy job for him. That's all there is to it."

He closed his notebook with a snap of finality.

"I'll get through to the Yard, and they'll lay hands on Monkey Ted in the morning."

"And if it isn't Simian Edward after all?" I asked.

"The Yard will know any of the other lads it might be, and it'll invite them all to explain where they were to-night. Oh, we'll get the fellow all right. A pity he only took money, though; you can't trace that—nobody takes the numbers of one-pound notes—but I remember the amount: seven pounds five and fourpence. That might help."

He looked at me a shade reproachfully, as if I had been tactless in disturbing my burglar before he had a chance to pocket something identifiable. Then he and his silent constable went away. Somewhere below I heard his voice soothing somebody who was expostulating at these interruptions of her slumbers.

I bolted the door, had a bath, blessing the invention of the gas geyser, changed my slumberwear, and went back to bed again.

V

THE shrill, loud, insistent tingling of the front door bell awoke me to full daylight. I jumped out of bed, padded along the passage, unbolted the door and opened it. On the landing stood a tall, pretty, fair girl, smartly but very quietly dressed. Although I had not seen her for five years, and in those she had

turned from a gawky schoolgirl of fifteen into a grown woman, I could not fail to recognise Brenda Lorimer.

Her clear grey eyes looked at me steadily and bravely, but the anxiety and distress in them were unmistakable and poignant.

"Uncle Jack," she blurted out, "is daddy here? Did he come here last night?"

"Come in, Brenda," I said, and led the way into the sitting-room.

I had, like a fool, forgotten that those things of Cecil's were lying about. She saw them at once, and turned to me with a little catch of her breath and a look of agonised appeal that wrung my heart.

"My dear," I said, "I'm afraid I've bad news for you; dreadfully bad news——"

She stared at me stonily.

"He's—dead," she faltered.

I nodded. I saw the tears rush into her grey eyes, saw her try to hold them back, saw her teeth shut down on her lower lip. She sank into a chair, looking up at me piteously.

"Tell me," she said.

I told her, and while I was speaking she reached out, as if mechanically, picked Lorimer's note-case from the table and held it tightly in her hand.

When I had finished she nodded slowly, sombrely.

"Of course," she said, "I've been afraid, for years. His heart, you know. He would work too hard, when he was on the track of a fresh discovery; he wouldn't rest or take care of himself. I've always been anxious.

And these last few days. . . . But I didn't think It seemed to me, as it seemed to him, that now you've come home. . . . I can't quite explain ; we seemed to rely on you to protect him from everything. . . ."

"If only I could have. . . ." I began.

She smiled sadly.

"I know. You were his best friend, his only friend. I'm—I'm so glad, Uncle Jack, that you were here, that it was you who found him, were with him at the end. He would have liked that." She paused, turning the note-case over and over in her hand and looking down at it. "I suppose," she said, "it was climbing these stairs, on top of everything else. Unless. . . ."

She looked up suddenly, and her young face had hardened ; there was an odd light in her eyes.

"Do you think," she asked slowly, her voice vibrant with some quality I could not understand, "that he was—*killed* ?"

I stared at her.

"Killed ?"

She nodded slowly, significantly ; her big grey eyes staring as if into infinite space.

"Murdered."

I simply gaped at her. I believed, at the moment, that the shock of her father's death had affected her mind.

"I don't think so for a moment," I said. "There was no sign of anything of the kind. The doctor said it was heart. Of course, there'll be an inquest ; a post-mortem. . . ."

She shuddered.

"I suppose that will be necessary. It's horrible, but—well, perhaps it will tell us the truth . . ."

Her voice broke; the tears began to roll down her cheeks. In an instant I was on my knees beside her, my arms round her, drawing her to me. After all, I was fifteen years older than she; I had known her since she was little more than a baby; she looked on me as a kind of uncle. She dropped her head on my shoulder and cried unrestrainedly, great sobs shaking her body. I felt pitifully helpless, unable to say anything, do anything, that would comfort her. I could only pat her shoulder and say "there, there" foolishly.

Presently she lifted her head.

"Thank you," she said. "I feel better now. I——"

"Look here," I said—awkwardly, I know—"you'll want to be alone for a bit. I'll go and dress. And then—have you had breakfast."

She shook her head.

"No. I came to you at once; as soon as I found daddy had not come back."

"Then we'll have breakfast. Must eat, you know, even if you don't feel like it. I'll ring down for something."

I left her huddled in the armchair, still clutching that note-case as if it were the only thing she had left in the world to hold on to.

VI

“WHY should you think,” I asked her over breakfast, “that Cecil was. . . .” I found it difficult to say the word. “Who in the world could have any reason to . . . to do anything to him? He was the straightest fellow who ever lived, and never did harm to a soul, poor old chap.”

The clear, candid grey eyes looked steadily into mine.

“I know you think I’m . . . I’ve got a delusion,” she said. “But I’ll tell you. It’s because of the man who came to Trewerry. Daddy was different immediately, and ever since. He was worried and . . . scared. And I’ve never before seen him scared.”

“What man?” I asked. “When?”

She thought for a moment.

“It would be last Friday,” she said. “In the evening; about dusk. I had been into Redruth in the car, to get some things; I’d been away, I suppose, a couple of hours. I ran the car into the shed, and—well, you know, put it to bed for the night, and gathered up my packages, and came out. The shed’s next to the laboratory, at the side of the house, facing the side wall, and from it you can see part of the path from the front door to the gate. And there was a man going down that path. I couldn’t see him clearly because, as I say, it was dusk, and pouring wet into the bargain—but he looked untidy; like a workman. And

it was the way he walked that struck me so uncomfortably. He . . . kind of shambled, and he was looking about him as he went . . . furtively ; as if he was afraid of someone watching him. That's what he looked like—afraid ; scared to death of something.

" I couldn't make it out, because nobody ever came to the house but the tradesmen. I locked up the shed, and went in. Daddy wasn't about, but I found him in his study ; he was looking at some papers—but of course that was nothing unusual. But the odd thing was that as I came in he put his hand down over them as if he was trying to hide them. He was always reticent, you know, but he'd never hidden anything from me before. It was only for an instant ; as soon as he realised that it was me, he lifted his hand again. I looked at the papers, from where I stood, but I couldn't see anything remarkable about them ; just written sheets of papers, only they weren't in daddy's writing ; it was much bigger and untidier—you know what a small, neat hand he . . . " she choked . . . " wrote."

I nodded. I was thinking of that torn piece of notepaper, now folded in the pocket-book in my inside pocket ; the message written in characters so unlike Lorimer's usual hand.

" Well," she went on, " he got up at once and came towards me, saying ' Hello, little girl, back again ? ' or something like that. He tried to speak in his usual tone, but I could tell that he was disturbed ; upset or something. I said ' Daddy, who was that man I saw going

away?' He said, instantly, 'Oh, only a poor beggar tramping to look for work. I gave him a bit to help him along.' I wasn't satisfied, because a man tramping like that doesn't look scared, as this one did; and why should daddy seem so disturbed about it? But it was no use asking anything more; you know what daddy was like, if he didn't want to tell you anything, you couldn't make him. So I went away to get supper—our char goes at six o'clock.

"At supper daddy was the same as usual—perhaps a bit quiet, as if he were thinking hard about something, but then he was so often like that. After supper he said he had some work to do, and went—not into his laboratory, which is a shed in the garden, but into his study. I went to bed, and I don't know if anything happened in the night. But one thing he did was write a letter to you, because in the morning it was on the table in the hall, and I gave it to the postman when he came." She paused and looked up at me. "You didn't get it, of course."

"No," I said. "I was in the Bay of Biscay then."

She nodded.

"Well, I went into the study. I couldn't help feeling anxious, of course; poor daddy always needed taking care of; you had to do things in spite of him, for his own sake. I looked for those papers, but I couldn't find any trace of them anywhere. After that—well, nothing happened, but daddy seemed unusually thoughtful, even for him, and worried

and nervous. Of course, he was always nervous, but now he started if a window rattled. There was no other sound to hear. The house stands in a lonely lane, miles from anywhere. You know how he liked perfect quiet to work in. And he bolted the doors and latched all the windows very carefully at night—an unusual thing with him ; he'd always said that we needn't be afraid of burglars, because we'd nothing in the house worth stealing. It seemed as if now he had something somebody might try to steal, and was afraid. I tried to ask him about it, but he always put me off with a joke ; a forced, unnatural sort of joke, and I couldn't, I simply couldn't get beyond that.

"Then yesterday morning your letter came. It was as if it took a load off daddy's shoulders. As soon as he'd read it he looked as if he would dance with joy and—yes, I'm sure it was relief. He said, ' Jack Carmichael's come home, Kitten. He's in London now. We'll go straight up and see him. Pack a suitcase and find out the first train we can catch.'

"I couldn't understand why he should be in such a tremendous hurry to see you, but it was no use asking questions, you know. So I threw a few things of his and my own into a suitcase and looked up the trains. I found we'd have to catch the two minutes past one from Redruth, so we ran in, in the car, and got the train, and came up to London. We got in about nine and went to a hotel, the Speedwell, in Bayswater. Then daddy said he was going to your flat to see you. He said he'd rather not

take me with him, so late at night. Oh, if only he had I sat reading in the lounge for a bit, and then I went to bed.

"This morning I got up and dressed and went to daddy's room, and found he wasn't there: his bed hadn't been slept in. I asked the night porter, who hadn't gone off duty, and he said he didn't think daddy had come back. So the only thing was to come to you. I didn't know your address, and I couldn't find your letter anywhere, but I'd seen it, and I remembered the name of the hotel you'd written from, so I rang them up, and they gave me the address of your flat and I—I just came."

I had listened with gathering interest and growing excitement. Her story seemed to confirm my idea that Lorimer had something definite, something important, that he had wanted to discuss with me; that his message was a very urgent cry for help. I brought out my pocket-book, drew out the torn bit of paper, and passed it to her.

"Can you make anything of this, Kitten?" I asked.

She read it carefully; looked up at me gravely.

"Where did you get it?" she asked.

I told her.

"Do you think," I asked, "that it may refer to those papers; the papers you said your father was looking at after the strange man had been to your house?"

She nodded.

"I don't think there's any doubt about it. I think it's perfectly plain that he hid the

papers somewhere, down there at Roseveare. Whatever they are, I think it worried him to have them in his possession ; he had reason, I think, to be afraid that his keeping them meant a risk to himself, yet, for some reason that I can't understand, he wouldn't, or couldn't, or daren't, destroy them." She looked down at the message, puckering her brow. "I think, really, he didn't know what on earth to do: he wasn't very practical, poor daddy. I believe that the only thing he could think of was to hide the papers—'hid well,' he says here"—she touched the note—"until he could ask advice, *your* advice, Uncle Jack. He had implicit faith in you, in your practical judgment and knowledge of the world. He wrote at once, you see, to you in Kenya. As soon as he got your letter, saying that you had come home, he came up from Cornwall as quickly as he could ; he came round here to see you as soon as he had me settled in the hotel. . . ."

"Just a minute," I said. "What time did he set out to come here ?"

She thought for a moment.

"I can't be certain of the exact time. But we got in at Paddington at nine, and went to the hotel, and sort of settled in. . . . It would have been something like a quarter to ten when he left the hotel. I don't know if he took a taxi: if he did, it would only take him a few minutes, wouldn't it? He would have been here just before ten."

"And I," I said, "came back at half past eleven. And it was after I had gone upstairs

that he must have come climbing up. . . . I should say that almost certainly he had called before, gone away, and come back again, poor old chap. If only I'd been in ; if only I hadn't dined at the club last night, he might still have been alive. . . ."

And then I realised the implication of all this.

"Brenda," I said, "do you mean . . . you think that somebody followed your father in here, and . . . and attacked him on the stairs. . . ."

She nodded solemnly.

"For those papers—whatever they are," she propounded.

"But he hadn't got them with him."

"They—whoever they are—weren't to know that. Tell me, Uncle Jack, were there any signs, as if he'd been . . . searched ?"

I sat back.

"By thunder," I said, "there were ; his pocket-book and letters and things were strewn all over the landing. I only thought he'd turned them out of his pockets himself, groping for a bit of paper to write on. But——"

I got up from the table.

"Look here, my dear, this is a job for the police. I'll ring up my friend the inspector. . . ."

She made a little gesture of distaste, appeal in her grey eyes.

"Must we, Uncle Jack ?" she pleaded. "Don't you think he'd rather we didn't ? I mean, he'd have taken the papers to the police himself if—if there hadn't been some reason why he shouldn't."

"Perhaps," I said. "But it seems to me the only thing we can do. If you're right, and poor old Cecil was . . . murdered . . . somebody's got to pay for it. It's beyond us to trace who the 'somebody' is, but the police'll find him. If we get hold of the papers, we can decide then whether we let the police see them or not."

I rang up the police-station. A toneless voice informed me that Inspector Jervis was off duty.

"Do you know anything about the case of Mr. Lorimer, who was found in Gardens Mansions last night?" I asked.

The voice suddenly acquired a tone of interest.

"Yes, sir. The inspector's been trying to trace Miss Lorimer, but Redruth report that the house down there is shut up. . . ."

"Miss Lorimer is here," I said, "at my flat."

"I'll ring the inspector up at his house, sir, and tell him. He'll want to know."

"I should like to see him," I said. "I suspect there's something more in this business than we thought; something in his line."

"Very good, sir, I'll tell him, and I've no doubt he'll come along. Will you be in for a little while?"

"Yes," I said. "We'll wait for him."

I hung up the receiver and turned to Brenda.

"Have you had enough brekker, Kitten?" I asked. "Yes? You haven't had much, my dear child, but I suppose you don't feel much like eating. . . . I'll ring the bell for them to clear it away. While we're waiting for the

inspector let's have another look at that note ; see if we can make any sense out of it."

She picked up the pitiful little bit of paper. "The last words he ever wrote," she said, her eyes brimming. "If only I'd been with him. . . . I wish I'd been with him. . . ."

She gulped. Then she blinked back her tears and threw back her head.

"I mustn't be silly," she said. "We've got to find these people, whoever they are: they must be punished. And we must find the papers. I feel . . . I'm sure that is what he would wish us to do ; to find them and . . . and do whatever you would have advised, Uncle Jack, if he had lived to tell you about it."

I nodded.

"I can't help feeling," I said, "that it's something tremendously important—to somebody. Whoever wants those papers has some terrifically powerful reason. And the things have a value of some kind, or your father wouldn't have been so determined neither to destroy them nor to let them be taken from him, at any cost, whatever the risk."

"Yes," she agreed eagerly. "Now let's see if we can find anything in the nature of a clue. Perhaps we can guess at the missing words."

After a waitress-girl had come to take away the breakfast things, and a housemaid was busy tidying up my bedroom, we spread out the bit of paper on the table and bent over it together. I took a sheet of plain paper and a pencil and jotted down the words we had :

*John have hid
 well (or "wall" ; we were neither of us
 certain about this)
 feet down north sid
 find them do
 best take care o
 B. . . .*

"We know, of course," she said, "that one word must be 'papers,' or something like that. 'John, have hidden'—Daddy would have said 'hidden' of course—'John, have hidden papers well—or 'in the wall'—'feet down north side . . . ' I don't know what that means."

"Perhaps," I hazarded, "so many feet down in a wall—a recess of some kind. How does the house face?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know. At least, it must face more or less south, mustn't it, because the sun is on the front most of the day, and hardly ever on the back? If the word is 'wall,' the north wall would be the back wall. Only . . . it might not be the wall of the house, might it? There's a wall all round the garden—one of those Cornish walls of loose flakes of stone. And the lab has a north wall, too . . . " She looked down at the message again. "Of course, it might not be in a wall; he might just have dug a hole in the garden, on the north side, and buried it. The word might be 'well.'"

"I don't think so," I said. "A spot like that would need a lot of measurements to

identify it, and there's no room for them, no sign of them, in this note. No, it must be so many feet down in the north side of something more definite, like a wall. But we don't know how many feet without the other half of the letter." I shrugged my shoulders. " 'Best take care of' . . . somebody: somebody, apparently, whose name begins with 'B.' But there are plenty of names beginning with 'B.' I'm afraid this doesn't get us far, little girl. The only thing is to do as poor old Cecil would wish—go down to Roseveare, and find these mysterious missing papers."

She gave a little cry and clapped her hands together. Her clear eyes shone into mine.

"Oh, Uncle Jack, can you? Will you? Will you really?"

"But of course," I told her. "It seems to me to be poor old Cecil's last wish; a . . . a command, almost. Of course I'll do it."

She sank back in her chair with a little sigh of relief.

"Thank you," she said. "I feel everything will be all right now—I mean, as all right as it can be, without . . ." Her eyes clouded. Then suddenly she made a little quick gesture of contrition. "Uncle Jack, I'm a selfish pig. I've talked of nothing but myself, and poor daddy, and all this business, and not a word about you: how you are and what you're doing. You said in your letter to daddy that you'd been ill: I can see you've been ill. *Very* ill, Uncle Jack?"

"Pretty bad," I said. "Malaria, you know, and blackwater. Bad enough, anyway, to put

paid to my career. The M.O. said that if I stayed in a tropical country I'd be nothing but a nuisance to myself and everyone I came into contact with, and my work would be no use to anybody. So I was invalided out and sent home. I'll have to find something to do in a more temperate climate. Matter of fact, I was all right up in the hills, but I couldn't stay there all the while, you see, and the coast got me down every time."

She made little sounds of commiseration, infinitely sympathetic: her big grey eyes, looking into mine, were divinely kind and tender.

"And why didn't you come straight down to us to convalesce?" she asked, almost reproachfully. "We'd have loved to have you. This flat. . . ."

She checked herself, but obviously she considered that I couldn't possibly have the care and attention I needed, alone in a London flat.

"Well, you see," I explained, "I haven't seen good old London for five years, and I didn't want to bury myself in the depths of the country for a bit. I've had enough to go on with of the depths of the country—though it was a different sort of country. I wanted to see a bit o' life."

She looked rather primly disapproving, I thought.

"But surely a hotel, or a club——" she suggested.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I wanted more quiet and privacy than you can get in

a club or a hotel, where some fool is always butting in and talking to you—or talking to somebody else at your elbow in one of those penetrating voices that you can't shut your ears to. You see I . . . I wanted to work . . . I'm proposing to write a book."

"A book?" she echoed, rather incredulously, I thought.

I nodded, a little embarrassed.

"About East Africa," I said. "It's really awfully interesting: I've seen and done and been mixed up in some very interesting things out there. I yarned about it a bit on the boat coming home, and several people said 'By Jove, Carmichael, you ought to write a book about it.' So I thought I would—not that I fancy myself as an author, you know, but I really have got things to tell; things the people at home know nothing about, and would be interested in. I thought there might be a bit of money in it—I believe some of these fellows who write books make quite a pot. Not that that matters so much, because of course I've got a pension, and a bit of money of my own, and a spot of accumulated pay that I hadn't a chance to spend in hospital. But, you know, it would be nice to see big, fat, handsome volumes in bookshop windows . . .

FIVE YEARS IN EAST AFRICA
by Captain John Carmichael,

and perhaps there'd be favourable reviews in the newspapers. . . ."

"I'm sure there will," she said with conviction.

"And anyway," I said, "the principal thing is, it would give me something definite to do for a few months, until I'm fit for active work again. That's what I need. I'd go crazy if I had just to potter about."

"Yes," she said eagerly. "You would. Certainly you must write your book, Uncle Jack; I'm sure it will be a perfectly splendid one, and I'll buy lots of copies, and tell everybody I know about it, and make them buy it too. But how did you find this flat?"

"I just went along to a house-agent fellow, and explained what I wanted, and he said he had the very thing on his books. He brought me round here to look at it, and I agreed with him. It was all ready furnished, you see—and quite comfortably furnished, and they do everything for you—catering and cleaning and everything for an inclusive rent——"

Brenda almost snorted.

"A pretty stiff one, I'll bet," she said.

"Not as things go nowadays, I believe. These are very old flats, you know, almost the first ever built in London, I should think: they're minus lifts, and a lot of other modern conveniences. But the situation's good, so central for everything, yet so quiet, in this back street. You'd never think, would you, that Church Street, with motor-buses roaring down it, is only just round the corner, and the howling High Street not five hundred yards away? So I paid him six months' rent in advance and moved straight in: once I've

decided to do a thing, I hate hanging about. I thought to myself that if poor old Cecil and you would come up to town I could give you a cheery time. That's one reason I wrote right away. I never guessed. . . ."

A ring at the bell interrupted me. I went to the front door and opened it. The inspector stood on the mat.

VII

" 'MORNING, sir," he said curtly. " You've got Miss Lorimer here, I understand."
" Yes," I told him. " Come in."

He marched into the sitting-room and looked Brenda over with his opaque eyes.

" 'Morning, miss. Very sorry about this business, very sad. You're in town, I take it ? "

She nodded.

" I'm staying at the ' Speedwell ' in Bayswater."

The inspector wrote it down in his notebook.

" Afraid I'll have to ask you to give evidence at the inquest: you'll be notified. Sorry, painful . . . but it'll only be a matter of formal evidence; identification. . . ."

" I shall be glad to give any evidence I can," Brenda said steadily, " that will help."

" I think, inspector," I said, " that it may be more than formal evidence. There's something we want to consult you about. Sit down, won't you ? "

He sat, his gaze fixed upon me, his manner one of weary patience.

"Miss Lorimer and I," I said, "are not satisfied about this business."

I saw resentment in his eyes.

"Not satisfied? How?"

"Not satisfied, I mean, that poor Lorimer died a natural death."

The inspector's expression changed to one of patronising indulgence. He gave a little shrug.

"That," he said reprovingly, "will be settled at the inquest. The post mortem will be held this morning, and the medical evidence will state quite definitely, Captain Carmichael, the cause of death."

"They'll say 'heart failure,'" I retorted. "All deaths are due, in the end, to heart failure—but usually something else causes the heart to fail. I want you to hear something Miss Lorimer has to tell you."

Clearly and concisely, Brenda told him about the man who had come to Trewerry House, and about the papers that had disconcerted her father so strangely. A faint, sceptical smile lifted the inspector's heavy moustache: I began to dislike him intensely.

"Not very much to go on, is it, miss?" he challenged. "All a matter of guesswork. It's easy to imagine things."

I saw a flush creep into Brenda's cheeks; a light leap into her eyes; her lips hardened, but she said nothing.

"Next," I said, "I want you to look at this. I found it in Lorimer's hand last night."

I placed the torn message in front of him. He studied it carefully, evidently reading it several times.

"Why didn't you show me this last night, sir?" he demanded.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Because, inspector, it didn't seem to me to be, as you yourself say, 'much to go upon.' I didn't think you'd attach much importance to it."

"I don't," he said. "I'll admit that it hangs together a bit with this young lady's story, but—what does it mean?"

"As it stands," I admitted, "it doesn't seem to mean much, but if we had the missing half——"

He cocked an eye at me.

"You haven't found it?"

"No, I hunted again last night, after you'd gone, but I couldn't find it anywhere."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"If it means anything," he said, "it reads like a bit out of one of those detective novels. But——"

It was quite plain that he believed Lorimer, in his dying moments, was suffering from some kind of delusion.

"You refuse to believe any of this," Brenda challenged.

He shook his head.

"I don't refuse to believe anything, young lady. I'm prepared to go into this, and if necessary I'll call in the Yard. But I've got to have something to go on. As it stands, your theory doesn't hold water. You were

at this Roseveare place five days, I gather, after the man called to see your father, before you came to London; down there in an isolated house in a lonely spot. If there was anyone after those papers, why didn't they come and take them there?"

"Daddy locked the house up very carefully every night."

The inspector's incredulous smile was more crushing than any words.

"Well," he said, "your theory implies that these unknown people tailed you and your father to London yesterday. Did you notice anyone who appeared to be shadowing you? Anyone following your car to Redruth, anyone hanging about at the station there, whom you afterwards saw in London, at Paddington, at your hotel?"

"No," Brenda admitted, "I didn't. But I wasn't looking out for anything of the kind."

He acknowledged this point with a grim nod. He began to tap his teeth with the end of his pencil, an exasperating trick.

"Well, the next point in your argument, that somebody followed the deceased here, attacked him on the stairs, inflicted fatal injuries in some way that left no trace, and got away, leaving him in a dying condition, without attracting any notice——"

"There was nobody about," I said.

"The struggle must have taken place practically at the door of somebody's flat. Yet so far as you know, nobody heard a sound."

"I haven't enquired," I said tersely.

"If anyone had, I think you'd have heard about it. Still, I can enquire. But take yourself, sir, and the taximan. You were only in the flat a few minutes, just long enough to pay the man off. You came out again and—you heard no sound of a scuffle, no footsteps? Neither did he?"

"No," I said. "That's true. I admit there wasn't much time. But I think there was time enough."

"For what? To hit him over the head? Yes. But he wasn't hit over the head. To strangle him? Perhaps. But he wasn't strangled. There was no time to—say, poison the man."

"Unless he were poisoned earlier?"

His eyes narrowed.

"How do you mean, sir, earlier?"

"Mr. Lorimer," I said, "left his hotel to come here at about a quarter to ten. I found him on the stairs here at approximately a quarter to twelve. We don't know where he was, or what he was doing, in the meantime."

"You think——"

"I imagine," I said, "that he came straight here, found I was out, went away again, and came back later. During that time——"

"You think he might have been got at? It's pretty far-fetched, captain. But I think we can probably find all that out. I'll make enquiries, anyway."

He rose to his feet.

"I don't mind telling you, sir," he said, "that I think you've got hold of a mare's

nest. But I'll make what enquiries seem promising, and if there's the faintest evidence that a crime has been committed, you can rely on the Force to do everything possible to bring the criminal to justice. That's our job. But so far I don't see anything to get my teeth into."

"Just a moment, inspector," I said. "What about my burglar?"

"You think he had something to do with the business; that he was after these mysterious papers?"

"I do." I saw that abominable indulgence in his eyes again. "You don't, inspector?"

"I don't, sir, and I'll tell you for why. We've got the man. It was Monkey Ted, as I expected. The Yard men got him at six o'clock this morning, at his lodgings. He admitted everything—he always does when caught—and it's as I said: he'd got information about the flat, knew you'd just moved in, and thought there'd be pickings. He wasn't after any secret papers; he's just a plain, common burglar."

"Oh," I said, considerably dashed.

"But you're going to do something," Brenda enquired. "You're not going to refuse to take up the case?"

The inspector smiled.

"There's no case to take up, miss. But I'll make enquiries, as I've promised, and if I find anything that looks suspicious, I'll follow it up.

And with that he went.

VIII

I went back into the sitting-room, after seeing the inspector out, and found Brenda sitting hunched over the torn paper.

"Not very helpful, that official," I said.

She looked up at me mutinously.

"You appear to agree with him," she almost snapped.

"No, no," I assured her hastily. "But I can see what he means. Whatever he may think in his private mind—if he possesses such a thing—in his official capacity he hasn't anything to make a case of—yet."

Her lips set into a thin, hard line.

"He will have," she said. "Uncle Jack, I've been thinking . . . about this bit of paper. It's odd that it should be torn in this way; it's extraordinary that, although you've hunted so carefully, again and again, the other half can't be found. It was very crumpled, wasn't it? Did it look as if . . . as if somebody had tried to tear it out of daddy's hand?"

I stared at her. Her words were like a beam of brilliant white light, illuminating the fog that clouded my mind.

"By thunder," I said, "I believe you've hit it, child. You're right. There *was* somebody there on the stairs. He searched poor old Cecil, but couldn't find the papers—because they weren't there. But he found this scrap of paper in his hand, tried to pull it away,

but before he could get it, he heard my door open, and the taximan starting downstairs. He had to leg it, quick. He made a last pull, the paper tore, and he went off with half of it in his hand. But I can't make out how it is I didn't hear him. Sounds echo like anything up this staircase well at night: I could hear poor Cecil breathing, hear the rustle of this bit of paper. Our fellow may have been wearing the softest of rubber soles, but I *must* have heard him padding downstairs; he'd have been simply tearing away, and you can't do that in absolute silence."

I frowned over this, trying to make it out.

"Suppose," Brenda suggested, "that he simply didn't run: he hid in a dark corner and waited till you'd gone upstairs again."

I shook my head.

"Possible," I said, "but not probable. There are no corners, the wall's as flat as a floor. And I don't believe he'd have risked it." I lighted a cigarette and drew at it. "Besides," I said, "I think he'd have pounced on the glorious opportunity of knocking out both me and the taximan, while our attention was very much engaged . . . I don't see how . . . Yes, I do! By thunder, why didn't I think of it before? Of course. He went the way I went a few hours later: he slid down the banisters. I *did* hear a kind of slithering sound, but I thought it was only poor old Cecil collapsing. The fellow slid right down into the hall, out into the courtyard, and away through the passages."

She looked at me with shining eyes.

"Uncle Jack," she said, "you are a great man." Then her face clouded. "But there's something wrong here," she said. "If poor daddy had been attacked, knocked down and searched, how would he have had a chance to write that note? He *couldn't* have done it, could he?"

This brought me up with a jerk.

"No," I admitted, "he couldn't. Unless they'd gone away . . . and come back again . . . No, there was no time for that, and they wouldn't have done it."

We thought hard about this for a little while.

"No," I said at last. "We must be wrong about this theory of a violent assault. Cecil must have been feeling ill, for some reason, when he came into the flats, and they must have been following him, waiting for him to collapse. By the time they came upon him he'd written this note, and the rest happened just as we've visualised it. They must have got at him in some sort of way between the time he left here—about ten—and the time he came back. I wonder where on earth the poor old chap went. Did he just wander about? Was he enticed into some place? . . . he was so unworldly, it would be quite easy . . . I wish we knew. But I don't see how we can find out. The inspector will, though."

"I wonder," Brenda said doubtfully.

"Oh, I think he will. I can't say I've taken a violent fancy to the fellow, but I think he'll do his best. After all, although he's so incredulous, there *is* the possibility of

a case for him here, and he won't neglect anything that may be evidence."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"I don't see that there's anything we can do, then," she said at last, "but go down to Roseveare and hunt for the papers. How soon can we go, Uncle Jack?"

"Hardly worth while going till we've got this inquest business over, and—and the funeral. And even then—well, as the inspector says, we haven't much to go upon. With only one half of the message . . . it's pretty vague, we'll probably have pretty nearly to pull the house down before we find the things. If only we had the other half. . . ."

"If only we could get it, if we had any idea who these people are, and could get the paper away from them. . . . Uncle Jack, if we're not quick, they may find the papers, with their half of the clue, before we can get there."

I stared at her. A sudden thought had struck me.

"Brenda—" I said, "this burglar of mine, what do you think he was after?"

"The papers," she said promptly.

I shook my head.

"No," I told her. "He'd be pretty certain that I hadn't got them. Cecil had had no chance to give them to me; remember, they'd searched him, and hadn't found them on him. I'm ready to bet that the other half of poor Cecil's message is every bit as significant and intriguing as the half we have; it would tell them that the papers are hidden somewhere, but it won't tell them where. They're as

helpless as we are. They can do nothing without our half, so they sent Monkey Ted to try and get it."

"Yes?" she asked.

"Don't you see? If these papers are so important to them, they'll do everything they can to get hold of our half. We've only got to wait for them to come and take it, and—collar them."

Her grey eyes shone.

"Uncle Jack," she said, "you are a great man. Where shall we wait for them? Here?"

I shook my head.

"When I said 'we,' I was speaking figuratively. *I'll* wait for them. You, my child, have got to be put in a safe place."

She pouted mutinously.

"I mean it," I said firmly. "These fellows are dangerous, they'll stick at nothing, that's obvious. An odd murder or two is nothing to them. I'm not going to run any risk of your being hurt, child. I—don't you see, I feel that poor old Cecil has . . . well, more or less left you in my charge. I've got to take care of you. And letting you sit up o' nights waiting for desperadoes isn't my idea of it. No, you've got to obey orders."

She opened her lips for further protest and then closed them.

"Very well, Uncle Jack," she said with a meek submissiveness I ought to have seen was too utter to be genuine. "What am I to do?"

I thought about it.

"I don't like you staying alone at that

hotel," I said. "Hotels are pretty safe places in one way, because there are usually plenty of people about, but they're dashed unsafe in another, because strangers can come in and go out all day and night long and nobody notices them. You see, now that you've been here, they'll suspect that I may have passed the other half of the message to you, and you'll be in danger all the time. . . . If I could think of a better place. . . ."

"Short of a safe deposit, or prison, I can't think of a really safe place," she said, with deplorable flippancy.

"Haven't you any relatives you can stay with?" I asked.

"There's only Aunt Hattie," she said slowly. "She isn't really an aunt—poor daddy had no near relations, you know—but she's known me since I was a kid, and I've always called her 'aunt.' She lives at Ealing. I might go and stay with her until . . . until we go down to Cornwall."

I did not like the sound of this very much.

"What sort of a household?" I asked doubtfully.

"Only herself, and a maid, and the dogs."

"Dogs? What sort of dogs? How many?"

"Alsations. A whole pack. I don't know exactly how many, but . . . well, a whole pack."

"That," I said, "sounds pretty good to me. A pack of Alsations isn't a bad body-guard. You'd better go and stay with her. I think that if possible you'd better vanish, Brenda; cover up your tracks."

"Yes, I see that." A sparkle of enjoyment leaped into her eyes. I believe that if the affair had not been so overshadowed by her father's death, the minx would positively have enjoyed it, called it "rather fun."

"Let's fix this up," I said. "Is Miss. . . . What's-her-name on the telephone?"

"Miss Winterton. And she is. I'll ring her up at once."

She gave me a little appealing glance that I understood; she would rather talk to Aunt Hattie, tell the story of Cecil's death, alone. I went into my bedroom and sat there, thinking things over.

Brenda, now that I had time to think about her, was something of an eye-opener. I had often wondered what kind of a woman she would grow up into, and wondered with considerable doubt. She had been four years old when her mother let poor Cecil down, and he, having no female relatives, had decided that he would bring her up himself, and though his devotion to her was so intense as to be pathetic, the poor old chap was about the worst person in the world to have the training of a child, especially a girl. While she was small he lugged her about with him wherever he went on his explorations into the jungles of scientific research-on-the-spot: when she grew old enough he sent her to a pretty good girls' public school, but she spent her holidays with him wherever he might happen to be. Actually this meant that she spent them largely by herself, for he was a glutton for work, and within limits—for, like many

unpractical men, Lorimer was indulgently yielding up to a point and absurdly and illogically adamant beyond it—Brenda did as she pleased. When I had last seen her, five years before, she had been a gawky, big-eyed, long-legged child, with appalling manners and an astonishing vocabulary of slang. Now she was—well, I have tried to convey an impression of the woman she had become; pretty, dainty, smart, courageous, candid, sensible, and with that air of confident assurance of the modern girl that makes us of an older generation feel older still, and woefully inadequate. I had never met anyone quite like her; I still do not believe that there exists in the world anyone quite like her to meet.

She herself interrupted my musings, coming straight into the bedroom.

"It's all right, Uncle Jack," she announced. "Aunt Hattie is fearfully bucked to have me. Now what do we do?"

"First," I said, as we went back into the sitting-room, "give me Miss Winterton's address and telephone number. No, I won't write them down; I must remember them. Then we'll take a taxi to your hotel and gather up your suitcase, and then we'll see what we can do to side track anyone who may be shadowing us."

She nodded expectantly, a twinkle of excitement dancing in the depths of her eyes.

"Though I don't see that it matters," she said. "If they *do* catch me, I haven't got the paper, so I can't give it to them, whatever they do to me."

"No," I said. "But you know what it

says." I paused for a moment. "Look here, Brenda, I think the safest plan would be to destroy that bit of paper, burn it. Then, however careless we may be, they can never get it. Are you quite sure you know exactly how the message runs?"

"Quite," she said positively. "Still. . . . Perhaps it would be better to have another look at it."

I took the slip of paper out of my pocket-book and we both looked at it carefully, memorising the words, visualising the appearance of the whole fragment. Then, holding it by one corner, I set light to it, held it till the flame scorched my fingers, then dropped it into the grate and watched the last corner flare up and turn into grey ash, which I broke up and scattered with the end of the poker.

"Now," I said, "nobody can get at the first half of that message, except through your lips or mine. And. . . ."

I stopped and swung round, hearing a movement behind me. In the doorway of the room stood a man, a thin, sharp-featured man in the blue trousers and sleeved waistcoat of a porter. One of his eyes seemed to be looking at the grate, and the other at me.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "I knocked, but I don't think you heard. I came about this here lock of yours. Shall I see about it being mended?"

"Er—yes," I said. "Yes, please do. Get it done as quickly as possible."

"Very good, sir," he said respectfully, and went away.

I looked at Brenda, and she looked at me.

"I wonder how much he heard, and saw," she said. "It can't be helped, of course, but if he's anything to do with them . . ."

"Oh, nonsense, Kitten," I said. "It won't do to start suspecting everybody we see. This fellow can't have anything to do with it. They couldn't possibly know I was coming to live here."

"No," she admitted slowly, "they couldn't."

"Exactly," I said. "Now come along."

IX

AS our taxi rolled through the gateway of the courtyard, and along the narrow little side-street, I glanced about for signs of any loungeur who might be surreptitiously keeping an eye on our movements. I saw nobody but an obviously genuine errand-boy leisurely pursuing his lawful avocation, and an equally real postman with his mailbag on his back. After we had swung into Church Street there were so many people on the pavements that it was impossible to detect if any of them were watching us.

"You know, Uncle Jack," Brenda said as we topped the hill, "you're going to a lot of trouble to take care of me, but what about yourself? You've been ill, you know: are you quite sure you're fit to tackle these people single-handed?"

The anxious concern in her voice sent a little thrill through me.

"I shall be all right," I assured her. "I've got a little argument, holding eight rounds of ammunition, that I think will settle things without any unseemly brawling."

Her big eyes were very round as she looked up at me. I think she was suffering from a desire to mother me, but realised that on an occasion like a meeting with our unknown opponents anything in the nature of mothering would be distinctly out of place.

"But perhaps," I conceded, "I'll get our friend the inspector to lend me a fat policeman to take the first shock of combat; kind of buffer state, you know."

I had no intention of doing anything of the kind—it would spoil everything—but the suggestion seemed to reassure her.

We reached the "Speedwell"—a fair-sized hotel with nothing in any way remarkable about it—and I waited in the lounge hall while Brenda went up to her room to pack her things. After settling the bill for her, I studied a railway time table and eyed the other occupants of the room. They were as depressingly ordinary a bunch as you could meet anywhere. I could find no distinguishing mark upon the features of any one of them that I would unhesitatingly swear to on any subsequent occasion.

Presently Brenda reappeared, and I saw repressed excitement in her eyes. She said nothing, though, until we were in a taxi bowling along the Bayswater Road. Then she turned

to me, laying her hand lightly on my coat sleeve.

"Uncle Jack," she said, "my room's been searched, my room at the hotel."

I looked down at her.

"Sure?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Very tidily, things put back nearly as they were, you know, but not quite. I think they've been through daddy's room, too, but I'm not quite sure. I hadn't put much out for him, you know, only his pyjamas and razor and things. They must have gone through them while I was at your flat."

"Did you make any enquiries?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I didn't think it would be any use. You may be certain they'd do it without being seen."

I was disposed to agree with her.

"They're not wasting time, are they?" I said. "Well, there's one bit of definite information, here. What they hoped to find was the papers, of course; they knew the half of the torn message wouldn't be at the hotel. So they probably don't know for certain that they're hidden down in Cornwall; I imagine their half of the message doesn't tell them that."

"Yes," she said slowly, "I suppose there's something in finding out how much they know, and don't know. And now?"

"And now," I said, "we'll have an early luncheon and then I'll despatch you, by a circuitous route, to your Aunt Hattie. I wish

I could come with you and see you safely installed, but it won't do. If we're being watched—we can't say that we are, but it's probable, and we must take no chances—the only thing is to separate and distract their attention. And you ought to be safe enough, going to Ealing in broad daylight. But ring me up as soon as you get there, won't you ? ”

“ I will,” she promised.

X

WE had a very delightful little twelve o'clock luncheon at the “ Connoisseurs.” If any of our few fellow-diners were shadowing us, they concealed the fact uncommonly well. None of them watched us half as closely as I watched them ; none showed any more interest in us than is usually aroused by a pretty girl lunching in public with a man.

At a little after one o'clock we left, in another taxi. I told the man, in a voice calculated to carry to the other side of the street, to drive to Victoria ; at Hyde Park Corner, as we were released from a traffic jam, I countermanded this and told him to go to Paddington.

He took us through the Park to the Marble Arch, and after threading the traffic roundabout to the Edgware Road, dived through side streets. Presently Brenda, who had been looking backward through the little rear window, said suddenly :

"We're being followed, Uncle Jack. A taxi that was behind us coming across the park is taking every turn that we do."

There was suppressed excitement in her tone. I looked down at her and her eyes shone up into mine. Confound it, I believe the chit was positively enjoying herself.

I restrained a very natural desire to peer out at the other taxi.

"Don't look again, my dear," I said. "Ten to one it's merely some other passenger for Paddington, very naturally taking the same route as ourselves. If it really *is* the enemy on our heels, we mustn't let him guess we suspect him, for then he'll expect us to play tricks. We must let him think we're ignorant of his existence."

Nevertheless, as we pulled up at the station and jumped out, I shot a carefully careless glance over my shoulder at the other taxi, just drawing in behind. I set Brenda's suitcase down on the pavement, and fumbled over paying our man so as to give the fare time to get out into my view. What I saw of him was not helpful. He was a perfectly plain, nondescript person whom one would put down vaguely as a business man of some sort and would hesitate to pick out among half-a-dozen others. He did not appear so much as to glance towards us, but dived hurriedly into the booking-hall.

I did not see him anywhere about as I approached the pigeon-hole, but to be on the safe side I asked, in a voice as loud as was decently possible, for a third single to

Redruth. Then we went out on to No. 1 Platform.

"Uncle Jack," said Brenda as we went, "you're frightfully extravagant."

"It's the details that count," I said. "Not worth while to spoil the ship for the sake of a railway ticket."

I made for the board that informs one from which platform the trains start, and studied it carefully. If the trains did not fit in with the plan I had framed, I should have to contrive another, but I thought they would.

They did. The one-thirty to Penzance started from No. 1, and was already there. Next to it, in No. 2, was another train—I've forgotten, now, where it was bound for and when it went; it doesn't matter, the point was that it was there. An Ealing train went at one-forty-nine, from Bishop's Road.

"Come along," I said to Brenda, and escorted her to the Penzance train. I put her into a compartment, settled her into a corner seat and slung her suitcase on to the rack. There were only two other passengers there, at the corridor end.

"Now listen," I whispered. "When I say 'go,' get out at the other side, go through that next train on to the next platform, and then cut along to Bishop's Road, where you'll find the Ealing train—the one-forty-nine. No, leave your suitcase where it is. I wish I could come with you, but I've got to stay and throw the enemy off the scent—if he is the enemy. When you get to Ealing, you've lost your ticket; you can throw that one away."

She grinned at me delightedly, the minx.

"Not much," she said. "if it isn't used I can get my money back—or, rather, yours."

I turned, beckoned a boy with a trolley full of magazines, and bought a "Windsor." Out of the tail of my eye I looked for our friend. He was studying the departure-platform board; if he were watching us he was doing it uncommonly cleverly, for he didn't seem to glance in our direction. But I saw him saunter past me, without looking at me, to the telephone boxes and enter one.

"Going to spread the glad news," I cogitated, "that the girl's going down to Cornwall alone. Good."

I bent through the window, gave Brenda the magazine, and said, very softly, "Go. Take a taxi at the other end. Ring me up as soon as you get to your aunt's."

She rose, and went out by the corridor door. Strolling slowly along and peering through windows I watched her move down the empty corridor to the next outer door, open it, slip out on to the footboard, straddle across, open a door of the other train a little way and slip into a compartment. Further than that I could not see. I beckoned a boy with chocolates and fruit, bought a slab of chocolate and a couple of bananas, and leaning into the carriage again, put them on the seat.

The whistle blew, and I stood back. I got out my handkerchief to wave—this struck me as an artistic final touch—but at that instant my friend burst from his telephone box, sprinted across the platform, and grabbing at a handle

a few compartments further ahead, dragged the door open and leaped in, just as the train began to move. I reflected that he might very likely take a parting glance at me, so I lifted my handkerchief and waved it vigorously as the train steamed out.

"Thorough, this gentleman," I mused. "Going to follow her all the way to make sure. In a little while he'll stroll along the corridor and take a peep into the compartment. He'll see a slab of chocolate and two bananas on the seat. I shouldn't wonder if he watches them for quite a long time before he discovers that the answer's a lemon."

I turned away and made for the Underground. A thought struck me. I, apparently, was left unwatched while our gentleman sped Cornwallwards in, as he believed, the same train as Brenda. Did they think that I was not worth watching, because they were certain I had given her the half of the message? Or did they feel safe to pick up my trail whenever they wanted to? Or was there a second fellow shadowing me? After all, it didn't matter. I had, I hoped and believed, put Brenda in a safe place for the time being, and that was the principal thing at the moment. But as I went down the sloping tunnel to the Underground I suddenly felt a little queasy shiver between my shoulder-blades. It's an unpleasant sensation, the suspicion that one is being shadowed. But I could detect no sign of anything of the kind happening to me just then.

XI

I delayed a little on my way to drop in at the High Street branch of my bank, where I had opened an account, and cash a substantial cheque for emergencies. As I entered the courtyard of the flats, the porter who had asked about the lock emerged from the doorway and came towards me, squinting horribly.

"There's a gent been asking for you, sir," he said. "He didn't give no name, but said he'd come again."

"What sort of a gent?" I asked.

"Oh, very posh," he said, looking at me with one eye and at the sky with the other. "Yellow gloves an' white spats." He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "But I didn't like the look of him, sir. Excuse the liberty, and p'raps after all he's a friend o' yours, sir, but if he ain't, and it's a business deal—why, sir, I'd keep me eyes skinned."

"Thanks," I said, rather tersely. "What about my front-door lock?"

"He ain't been yet, sir," the porter said, "but I shouldn't fink he'll be long now."

I went on. The fellow's advice was well meant, I supposed, but after all it was a gratuitous impertinence, and . . . and curious. I couldn't quite get that out of my mind. It was distinctly an odd thing for a porter to say, to do.

I had been in the flat about a quarter of an hour when the telephone-bell rang. I picked

up the receiver and said "Hello," and Brenda's unmistakably clear, buoyant voice said "Who's that?"

"Uncle Jack," I told her.

"Good. I just wanted to make sure. I'm here all right, Uncle Jack, and I haven't seen any signs of being dogged. Aunt Hattie's as bucked as a bear to have me, but she's busy pouring ice-cold water on our theories. Doesn't believe a word of it all. Says things like that don't happen in England. But she says that if anybody *does* try to break in here, heaven help him! She'll turn the pack loose, and he'll know what a fox feels like on a hunting morning."

I put the receiver down with a feeling of relief. Brenda was in safe hands. Then I began to think about the matter of the inquest. I wanted as searching an enquiry as possible into the circumstances of Cecil's death, and I knew that I stood a precious poor chance of getting it. If the doctors who conducted the post-mortem found nothing to indicate to their minds any likelihood of murder, there'd be a prompt verdict of Death from Natural Causes, and very little hope of ever getting at the truth. I badly wanted to cross-examine them, cross-examine everybody concerned, but I doubted if the coroner would let me do it, if he would consider that I had any *locus standi* in his court. I was a shade diffident, too, about my competence for the task. The only thing was to be legally represented, but my trouble was that I knew no lawyer in London. I did not care to pick one blindly, out of the

telephone directory. The only course I could think of was to go along to the Club, find somebody I knew, and ask him to recommend a lawyer.

I was on the point of rising to set out on this quest when my front-door bell rang. I opened the door, and standing on the mat was unquestionably the "posh gent" the porter had mentioned, a little wrinkled man in pale grey, with white spats on his ankles and chamois leather gloves in his hands. He had a mild, benign face, slightly side-whiskered, but his eyes were ferrety.

"Captain Carmichael?" he asked.

I admitted the fact.

"My name is Kesteven. I represent Leslie & Lucas, of Bedford Row."

I think I must have stared, for the firm he had mentioned was quite one of the most eminent and respectable on the roll; keepers of the secrets of half the notable families in England. He smiled drily, and I was annoyed at having given myself away.

"I had better give you a card," he said. "I don't want to run any risk of your doubting my *bona fides*."

From a very handsome-looking Russia leather notecase he brought out a card and presented it to me. I took it, and looked at it without conviction. After all, anyone can have a card printed with anybody's name and address.

"If that isn't sufficient," he said, an undercurrent of offensive amusement in his voice that I could have kicked him for, "you may ring up my office, describe my appearance,

and so identify me to your satisfaction." He waited, obviously for me to ask him in.

"I'm not sure that it would," I said, disliking the fellow. "In any case I see no reason for going to that trouble. What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you on an important and confidential matter," he said, eyeing me closely, "connected with the late Mr. Cecil Lorimer."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Who in thunder told you," I challenged, "that Lorimer is dead?"

He smiled in an offensively superior way.

"We have our own sources of information," he said airily. "Perhaps this will convince you that I have a genuine interest in this affair. If I may talk to you——"

"Come in," I said, amazed and certainly impressed.

He walked into my sitting-room and waited for me to ask him to sit down. I did, and waited in my turn. He fixed his ferrety gaze on me and said:

"There's no need to beat about the bush, Captain Carmichael. I—we—have reason to believe that shortly before his death Mr. Lorimer was entrusted with certain papers that are actually, and legally, the property of a client of ours who is—a person of importance, of distinction. It is vital to our client that he should recover those papers—which were stolen from him—without delay, and without their being seen by anyone else."

He paused, and I could see that he was watching me closely, trying—confound his

impudence—to read my thoughts. I hope I succeeded in looking as blank as I tried to.

“Well?” I challenged.

“I understand,” he went on, “that you were a great friend of Mr. Lorimer’s—in his confidence; in fact, that he was on his way to see you when he died. I naturally thought it probable that you know something about the papers I have mentioned, possibly where they are now: you may even have them in your possession.”

He was staring hard at me, watching, I am certain, for my eyes to move betrayingly to some article of furniture in the room where the papers might be concealed. I merely shook my head.

“The only papers I have of Lorimer’s,” I said, “were in his pocket when I found him. If you like to look at them, you may.”

I went to the bureau and brought out the few oddments that had been in poor Cecil’s pockets. At the mere sight of them he shook his head.

“Oh no,” he said. “Those are not they. They would be something bulkier.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“These are all I have. And I don’t think there are any papers in his luggage—such as it was. I have just seen his daughter off at Paddington; she has the one suitcase they brought up from Cornwall, and she said nothing to me of any papers in it.”

He nodded thoughtfully, gazing about the room. Then he looked at me again suddenly and said:

"Captain Carmichael, I'm afraid you distrust me. I don't know why you should, but I feel it. I'll be as frank with you as I can. I'm not allowed to put all my cards on the table. I can't tell you exactly what those papers are; I can't possibly tell you the name of our client. But I want you to understand this, that if those papers get into the hands of the wrong people, it will be nothing less than a national calamity. I won't insult you by offering you a reward for their surrender—though our client would be ready to pay a very, very considerable amount—but I put it to you, as an Englishman, and a former public servant, that it is your duty to restore these documents to their rightful owner."

His earnestness, a ring of apparent sincerity in his voice, swayed me for the moment, but he was perfectly right in his divination that I distrusted him. I was ready to distrust almost anybody who was connected with those wretched papers, and I had no doubt that, for all his apparent respectability and the card he had thrust upon me, he was something to do with the blackguards who, I was convinced, had killed poor Lorimer. I looked him steadily in the eye and said:

"If I had those papers, or knew where they were, I should be only too glad to restore them to their rightful owner—if I knew who he was."

He stared hard at me in silence for a few moments, appraising me.

"You know nothing," he said at last, and it was a statement rather than a question.

"Nothing," I assured him, and got up.

He rose, too—a little blankly, I thought.

“I suppose,” he said, moving slowly towards the door, “that you will be going down to Cornwall soon, to go into Mr. Lorimer’s affairs?”

“As soon as I can get away,” I said.

He nodded again, looking very thoughtful. I pushed past him, opened the front door, and said “Good-afternoon.”

“Good-afternoon,” he said, and went slowly, thoughtfully, down the stairs. I watched him go. I had not succeeded in getting anything out of him—I had seen no opportunity—but I felt confident that he had got nothing whatever out of me.

It was not till later that I realised two things: first, that he seemed to know an inexplicable thing about me, my late position, and, secondly, that during my absence that afternoon my flat had been very thoroughly searched.

XII

I DECIDED that, after all, before going to the Club I had better enquire when I might expect to have the lock of my front-door mended. The porter had given me the name of the locksmith, so I rang him up, and was assured that a man with a new lock was actually on his way. So I waited for him, and while he was actually doing the job a stolid person called, introduced himself as the

coroner's officer, and handed me a paper calling upon Brenda and myself to attend as witnesses at the inquest on Cecil at the West London Coroner's Court at eleven o'clock the following morning. I rang up Brenda accordingly, then examined the new lock and saw that it worked satisfactorily, and sent the man away with a tip.

Then I went along to the Club and had tea, but there wasn't a soul about whom I knew. I hadn't the addresses of anybody in town, either. The only thing was to wait until somebody came in. To while away the time I looked at the newspapers. I reckoned that Cecil's death would have happened too late to get into any of the morning papers, and I was right. But in the earlier editions of the evening papers I found a short paragraph—the result, I imagined, of information given by Inspector Jervis to some reporter from a news agency. It merely stated that at an early hour that morning the body of a well-dressed man, who had since been identified as Cecil Lorimer, of Roseveare, Cornwall, had been found on the staircase of Gardens Mansions, Kensington, by Captain Carmichael, a tenant in the mansions, whom the deceased was on his way to visit. Also that the cause of death was believed to be heart failure.

Nothing at all illuminating in that. I went on reading the paper, idly. I read an enthusiastic article upon the Government of the day, praising the long-foreshadowed appointment of one James Faulkner, a prominent financier, as chairman of a committee of

business men who were to conduct, on the Government's behalf, financial negotiations of the greatest importance with a Continental power. Mr. Faulkner, it appeared was a man of unimpeachable honesty and integrity; no scandal of any kind had ever touched his name. In his hands, the paper said, the interests of Britain were safe. I was glad to hear that, though I knew nothing about the gentleman in question.

I read, also, that two convicts who had escaped from Dartmoor a week previously had not yet been recaptured.

And then, quite suddenly, a name jumped to my eye, as familiar names will, and I sat blinking at it for a moment before I read the short paragraph, not at all sure that I was not suffering from a delusion, and that as I looked the name would change again into something else, something unknown to me. Possibly, if I had not had Lorimer at the back of my mind all the time, I should not have noticed this name, but as it was, it flung itself at me, the name "Tresilian." The paragraph read :

The man who was found dead, apparently from exposure, in a field near Redruth, Cornwall, yesterday morning, has now been identified as that of Andrew Tresilian, who was recently released from Dartmoor Prison after serving a sentence of three years for embezzlement.

I read the paragraph twice, to make certain that I read it aright. Then I sat back and began to think. I had never known Andrew

Tresilian, the brother of Mrs. Cecil Lorimer. He was a rolling stone, a mining engineer who seemed to wander about the world looking for lodes in the most remote regions, and hardly ever in England; a bit of a black sheep, too, I gathered. Cecil had never mentioned him since his wife left him. I had read nothing about his trial in such English papers as I had read out in Africa; probably it was not reported at any length, and there were periods, when I was up-country, when I did not read any home newspapers at all.

In Andrew Tresilian himself, and his record, and his release from prison, I was not in the least interested, but there was one fact in that curt, obscure paragraph that shone before me like a blazing light—the fact that he had been found in a field, “dead from exposure,” near Redruth—that is to say, not many miles from Roseveare.

Impossible not to surmise that the man whom Brenda had seen leaving the house was Andrew Tresilian. Quite unlikely that she would recognise him, almost certainly she had not seen him previously since she was a small child. If it were indeed Andrew Tresilian who had called on Cecil that night, it would account for Cecil’s agitation, his disturbance. That, and the nature of the papers, whatever they were, that he left behind him. He had left the papers and gone away into the streaming darkness, looking, Brenda had said, “as if he were scared to death of something.” And the next thing was, apparently, that his body was found in a field; he had apparently “died

from exposure"; he had died, as Cecil had died, under conditions that would impel a coroner's jury to bring in, on the medical evidence, a verdict of "natural causes." It seemed to me that there was too much similarity here for mere coincidence; there was a very clear and definite indication, I thought, of a mind, or minds, determined to lay hands on those papers and not scrupling at murdering, in some unfathomably ingenious way that defied detection or solution, anyone whom they believed might have the things in their possession.

I was very thankful that Brenda was in safety.

A breezy voice, with the very faintest suspicion of a brogue in it, broke in on my grim musings.

"Hullo, Carmichael," it said. "I've not seen you in years."

I looked up, and the room appeared to be considerably filled by young Terry Rattigan of the King's African Rifles, presumably home on leave. He is the largest and heftiest youth I have ever known; tall, broad, with a chest like a beer-barrel and limbs like a muscular elephant. His wide, freckled face wore an expansive grin of friendly welcome, his rusty-iron hair rose in an uncontrollable entanglement.

He threw himself into a chair so that it groaned. "What's yours, old man, and how's the world using you? You're looking a bit dicky, now. Africa not suit your constitution?"

I eyed him thoughtfully. He was an irrepressible, irresponsible schoolboy, but he

might be able to give me the introduction I was sick of waiting for.

"Ratty," I said, "do you know of a decent lawyer?"

He stared at me, ingenuous astonishment in his vivid blue eyes.

"I do," he said, "I know three—and one of the other kind. What's the trouble, now?"

I eyed him again. It seemed to me that he might be very, very useful. His mental equipment, I knew, was not of a high order, but he was very handy in a scrap; he hadn't enough imagination to be afraid of anything on earth, and he would obey orders with implicit loyalty, to the last ounce of his strength.

"Order that drink," I told him, "and I'll give you the whole yarn."

I did, in ordered detail. He simply gaped at me like a fish, blank incredulity deepening on his face as I went on.

"Well," I challenged, when I had finished, "what do you think about it?"

An expression of pained perplexity came into his face.

"Don't ask me to think, old man," he implored. "I'm not up to it, it makes my dome ache. You've got your own ideas, and I bet you're right, you're a brainy merchant. Out of the welter I'm capable of deducing two things—number one, that you want to hire a legal bloke to do the chin-wagging for you at the inquest. Am I right?"

"Perfectly."

"I know the very lad: Vansittart. Smart as paint and one of the best."

"Can I get hold of him this evening?"

"I shouldn't wonder. He has a flat in the Adelphi, and there's a distinct risk that he'll be sitting there now, like a spider in his web, reading the most fearsome legal documents. I'll ring him up in two ticks. But I just want to enquire about point number two; it looks to me as if there's a hope of a real, fruity, honest-to-goodness scrap in the offing. Am I right?"

"It looks probable," I admitted.

"Then as man to man, old top, let me in on it. I've been kicking my heels in London for five solid weeks, and my constitution needs exercise. Let me give you a hand, now. I'm no use in a thinking part, but if you want somebody to sling bad lads about the place, you'll find me quite handy."

I ran my eye over him again.

"By thunder, Ratty," I said, "I believe you're right. I think I may be glad of you."

"Good," he said. "Ah, here come the drinks."

We drained our glasses in a silent toast, and he lumbered off to the telephone. He was back within three minutes.

"Vansittart's in," he said. "He'll see us if we flip along now. I'll yell for a taxi."

XIII

VANSITTART I found to be a burly young man, who looked as if he would be more at home in a rugger scrum than a lawyer's

office or a court of law. I told him the whole story, as I had told it to Rattigan, and he proceeded to show me that he certainly had the legal mind. He had taken in each detail, with all its implications, and given it due weight.

"It looks fishy," he said. "I agree with you there. But the police can't do anything on the evidence, they haven't the merest beginnings of a trail to follow unless they can trace the man who shadowed you and find out something about him—if he really had anything to do with the business. And if, as you say, the inspector's got it firmly into what he calls his head that no crime has been committed, that conviction will take some shifting."

"If I went to the Yard—" I suggested.

"You'd be received with polite incredulity, and told that the matter will be enquired into. No, that's no use. We've got to give 'em something to take hold of. But—no, I don't think I'd better cross-examine anyone at the inquest, Carmichael. I'll be there, if you like, to look after your interests and Miss Lorimer's, but—well, the inquest will probably be reported; if there's any hint of a murder, it will be reported with a bang. If, as you suspect—and I admit it's feasible—Lorimer was murdered by a gang who're after those papers, they'll read that report; possibly they'll even have somebody present at the inquest. Anything of the kind you suggest would put them on their guard."

As a matter of fact, this had begun to dawn upon me.

"Yes," I said. "I see that. I think you're quite right." I thought for a moment, and then put another question. "And what do you think about my caller, the fellow who said he came from Leslie & Lucas?"

He frowned.

"I can't say for certain, not having seen him, but from your description it sounds like Kesteven all right. If it is, you may take it from me that he's nothing to do with any gang. His firm wouldn't touch anything shady. If he's Kesteven, he's genuinely acting for a real client—whatever he may be. I can't hazard a guess. But half Leslie & Lucas' business consists in keeping scandals about notable people, and families, from becoming public property; settling them quietly, you understand, in a perfectly proper way, but avoiding publicity and cases in court."

He rose to his feet.

"I'll be at the inquest," he said, "and keep my ears open. If I can put in a question without exciting suspicion, I will. And I'll have a chat with the inspector. But your long suit is to keep quiet and not let the enemy—if there is an enemy—guess that you know, or suspect, anything."

And with that I had to be as content as I could.

"Skipper," said Rattigan, as we left the Adelphi, "I gather that you're going back to your flat to lie in ambush for the gent with Part II of the divided message. Am I right?"

"That's my idea."

"And a very fruity one too. But—I'll not

suggest, old man, that you're biting off more than you can chew, and I wouldn't butt in for worlds, but I would like to play Second Gravedigger in this act."

"So you shall," I told him. "Only—I don't think we'd better go to the flat together. If he knows you're present, he'll stay away, being probably not equipped to tackle red-headed elephants. Come along after dinner, and take the stairs quietly but negligently. You understand? There are nine other flats on those stairs you might be going to, and unless I've been sleuthed better than I suspect, our friends won't know that you're anything to do with me."

"Good egg," he said. "You buzz off and get some dinner. I'll come along to your flat about ten."

XIV

ON the way back I decided that I would not taxi right up to the flats, but would walk the last bit, in the hope of discovering if I were being watched or followed. So I stopped the taxi at St. Mary Abbot's, got out, and sauntered up Church Street. I turned into the narrow, dark, silent side street, and strolled slowly on. In a few moments I heard footsteps behind me, moving at much the same pace as myself. I stopped, took out my cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. The

footsteps stopped an instant afterward. After the flare of the match had died down, I looked back, but in the shadows of the ill-lighted street I could see no one. I moved on again, and the footsteps, after a momentary pause resumed. At the corner I stopped again and turned quickly. Fifty yards behind me was a small figure. I will say this for him, that he had the sense not to try and dive into cover, but came steadily on. As he passed beneath an inadequate street lamp I saw that he held a lead, to the other end of which was attached a Pekingese dog.

I moved round the corner to the next lamp post, and waited for him to come after me. He did, and I took a good look at him. Certainly he was the most inoffensive-looking "shadow" who ever dogged a man, a small, sandy, spectacled fellow, very respectably dressed and with, as I say, that toy dog in tow. Already feeling that I was making a fool of myself, I accosted him.

"Good-evening," I said. "Don't you think you're the very worst shadower on earth?"

He stared at me in indignant amazement.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean, sir," he protested, in a thin, peevish voice. "I don't know you. I——"

"If you're trying to pretend that you're not shadowing me," I challenged, "why did you stop just now, when I did?"

He puffed himself out importantly.

"I decline to account for my actions to you. I live on the hill, and I am exercising my wife's dog. Either you are suffering from

delusions, or you're deliberately trying to be offensive. If I see a policeman——"

"Oh, all right," I said. "But if ever I have the luck to meet your master, I'll tell him that however good his other men may be, you're a dud at the job."

And with that I left him, walked into the courtyard, climbed the stairs, went into my flat, and sat down to wait for Rattigan.

He arrived, as he had promised, at ten, announcing himself by a gentle tapping at the door. I let him in quietly, and he signified his appreciation of the situation by persistently speaking in a husky whisper.

"I don't suppose," I said, "that our friend will come before eleven, when the lights are turned out. We'll keep my hall light burning till ten minutes past, and then I'll switch it off, turn on the bedroom light, and, for the benefit of any possible watchers, go through the motions of going to bed, making good shadows on the blind. Then I'm going to get into the dark corner by the fireplace in the sitting-room—there's no other cover in the room. I want you to hide in here, in this big cupboard at the end of the hall. I believe it will hold even you. If anyone does get in—Well, I don't think I need tell you what to do."

"No," said Rattigan in his sepulchral whisper. "You do not."

XV

ST. Mary Abbot's clock had struck midnight, and I was feeling uncommonly stiff and cramped in my corner, and doubtful whether I were not making a first-class fool of myself, before I heard slight sounds, clicking and scratching sounds, at my front door. They went on for quite a little while, and then a very faint rattle, and a sudden draught of cold air across the room, told me that the door had opened. A moment later I heard a very soft footstep on the threshold of the sitting-room, gentle breathing, and felt a very definite human presence. Then suddenly a tiny pencil of white light stabbed the darkness and began to wander about the room.

I stood still, shrinking into my corner, holding my breath, hoping that that ray of light would not fall upon me, for I wanted to be between the intruder and the door before I broke cover; I had an uneasy feeling that if I jumped on him prematurely and failed to hold him he would certainly race me to the stairs and down them to the open air.

The light went out, and I heard the soft, almost inaudible footsteps receding along the corridor. It seemed to me then, though I could not be sure, that other footsteps, those of at least one other man, mingled with them. Here seemed an opportunity to cut off the enemy's retreat. Cautiously, noiselessly, I slid from my hiding place, crossed the room—

remembering to circumnavigate that confounded table—and crept out into the passage. There I stopped, listening. I could not hear a sound. I peered into the darkness, strained my ears into the silence. I saw a faint flash of white light ahead, heard just the beginnings of a thin, fluty whisper.

“Curly,” it said, “he’s not. . . .”

As I gathered myself for a spring I was conscious of somebody advancing swiftly upon me in the darkness. And then, before I could move a finger or open my lips, something seemed to split my skull right across the top. I had a momentary sensation of falling at incredible speed into unfathomable depths, and then everything went black.

XVI

I CAME back to consciousness to hear my own voice imploring somebody to stop my head from opening and shutting. Then I opened my eyes, to find myself lying on my bed, and Rattigan sitting beside me, an anxious concern on his broad face that was almost comic.

“Are you alive, now?” he asked eagerly.

“Quite,” I said, putting my hand to my bandaged head. “I feel as if my skull is split, and I think I shall be as sick as a cat in a minute, but otherwise I’m all right. What happened, Terry? Did you get him.”

He shook his head despondently.

"He was too quick for me."

"What exactly happened?"

"It was like this: hiding there in the cupboard, I heard the two of them come sneaking up the passage: I heard one of them go into your bedroom: t'other one waited outside. I hung on for him to go in too, so we could collar the pair. Then I heard the first one coming out again, whispering that you weren't there, and then there was an imperial bump as you went down. I broke cover then, charged blind into Number One, knocked him down and fell on him. It was all in the dark, you understand, and I couldn't see a damned thing, but I heard t'other fellow jump over you, scoot through the door, and out. He must have got you mighty sudden, skipper. How he saw you I don't know, he must have cat's eyes, but it's plain he knew you were there, and lammed you quick, and scooted the second I came out of the cupboard. I couldn't chase him, because I didn't want to leave the beggar I was lying on."

"Oh," I said, "You've got one of 'em, then?"

Rattigan grinned delightedly.

"He's in the sitting-room, trussed like a fowl. But I doubt if he's much use to you. He looks nothing but a hired mercenary. Hadn't an ounce of fight in him, just gave in," he added in disgusted disappointment.

"Let's have a look at him," I said.

A bit shakily, for I still felt sick and every movement seemed to tear slits in my brain—I got up and went with Terry into the sitting,

room. There, most scientifically tied to a chair with the window curtains, was a pasty-faced, undersized little snipe of a wretch, who looked at me with scared eyes.

"I never done it, guvnor," he bleated. "S'welp me, I never done it. It was Curly."

I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"And who," I asked, "is Curly?"

His eyes shifted and went sullen.

"I dunno him by no other name. Just Curly."

"Look here," I said, "this isn't good enough. I'm willing to believe that you're only hired for this job. If you'll tell me the whole truth I'll let you go. If not—well, we'll find some way of getting the truth out of you."

He threw a frightened, sidelong glance at Rattigan, towering menacingly beside him.

"I'll tell you all there is to tell, guvnor, but it ain't much," he bleated. "I met Curly this evening, at a pub. . . ."

"What pub?"

"The old Fox and Grapes at Camberwell. Curly says he's got a job on, but wants an 'and. Says if I come in he'll make it worth me while. So I says 'O.K.' and I meets him as arranged. . . ."

"Where?"

"Why, at the old Elephant and Castle. And we comes along here, and Curly wangles the lock o' your door. He's told me, previous, that I'm to spy the room straight in front o' the door, and if it's all's clear, to turn left along the passage and take a peep into the last door and see if you're asleep. So I does,

him follering. I sees all clear in the fust room, and then I looks in the other, and sees you ain't in bed and the bed ain't been slep' in. And I turns to tell Curly, and the nex' thing I hears Curly knock you down, and this gent falls on me from be'ind like a ton o' coals an' pretty near squashes the breath out o' me freezin' body." he shot a malevolent glance at Rattigan, "and while he's a-putting of me down, Curly does a bunkidoodleido."

I looked at the fellow, wishing I had the gift, common to people in novels, of being able to tell whether or no a man is telling the truth. I was inclined to believe this specimen, but I could not be sure.

"That won't wash," I told him. "It's no use telling me that you undertook this job without knowing what you were after. What did you expect to find here?"

"I dunno, guvnor; strewth I don't. I arst Curly, but he told me to stow me jaw. Said there was fifty quid for me if we pulled it off, and no freezin' curiosity."

"You must know more about this Curly than you pretend," I said. "You wouldn't come on a job like this with a man you knew nothing about."

A sudden vindictive light came into his eyes.

"If I knew, guvnor," he spat, "I'd tell you. Straight I would. He's done a bunk and left me in the ditch, and if I could split on him I would. I know him, yes: I done one or two little jobs with him, but I only met him at places like the Fox and Grapes. I never knew him by no other name, I dunno where

he hangs out, I dunno nothing more about him."

His tone carried conviction. I looked enquiringly at Rattigan.

"I think he's telling the truth," he said. "I think the poor devil's just been hired, and knows nothing. You promised to let him go if he coughed up the whole yarn."

I turned to our prisoner.

"Look here," I said, "I'll keep my word and let you go. But I may want you, some time or other, to help me. Give me your name and address—and no tricks, mind. I can have you run in any time, you know. I bet you're pretty well known to the police."

He grinned slyly.

"Not half I ain't. You're a toff, guv'nor. I won't try to swing it on you. Covey's me moniker, Joe Covey, and when I ain't in quod I doss at Number Fourteen Paradise Terrace, Kennington. Or you can ask for me at the Fox and Grapes at Camberwell."

"Right," I said. "I shall expect you to play the game. Oh, just one thing, Ratty. I don't suppose it's the faintest use, but we'd better search him before we let him go."

We did, and pretty thoroughly, but found nothing on him but a few implements that would have got him arrested on suspicion on any night in the year, a crushed packet of cheap cigarettes, a couple of crumpled, disgustingly indecent postcards, and a few coppers. Then we released him.

"Get out," I said, "and mind how you go. If you're seen going down the stairs, or through the courtyard. . . ."

He gave me a wink of low cunning.

"Trust me, guvnor," he said, and sidled out of the door.

"I don't know if I've done a fool thing," I said to Rattigan, "but I believe the little snipe was telling the truth, and I'd given my word——"

"I'm afraid I've mucked it," Terry said penitently. "If I'd collared the other one, now. . . ."

"I don't see how you could," I told him, "And by thunder, Ratty, I'm glad you were here. If I'd been alone, and they'd collared me. . . ."

"They'd not have got the message out of you."

"No," I said. "But I think they'd have put me out of the way of interfering with their pursuits, and then they'd have gone after Brenda."

He looked at me solemnly.

"But you said she was safe at her aunt's."

"So, I hope, she is; but don't you see, man, you can't keep a girl like that shut up in a safe place for ever. We've got to get to grips with this gang somehow and settle with them, or they'll get her and her life won't be worth a snap of your fingers. They'll stick at nothing."

I saw a slow flame mount in his vivid blue eyes.

"By God," he said, "I'm in this now, skipper, to the end. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it, if I have to go through hell and back again barefoot."

I nodded, yawning, and moved towards the whisky decanter. I felt as if someone had sliced my brain through and the edges were chafing together. Whatever my friend had hit me with, it was an uncommonly effective weapon; a little more force and I should probably have been a dead man.

At that instant we heard scrambling sounds on the stairs. I stood irresolute, my hand outstretched towards the decanter. Rattigan moved uncertainly towards the front door. It burst open—my nice new lock had been put out of action—and Mr. Covey came tumbling into the room. His pasty face had gone pale green, he was shivering with fright, his teeth chattering; in his eyes was a fear and horror that was sickening to see.

"Hullo," said Rattigan, "what the devil's the matter with you now?"

The fellow collapsed into a chair and lay there shivering, his thin hands quivering before his face.

"It's Curly," he whimpered. "Curly. Someone's done him in. He's lying down there. . . . Oh my Gawd . . . he's lying down there on the stairs with his head bashed in."

XVII

OFTEN, when I have a nightmare, I am descending everlasting flights of stairs by the light of a flash lamp towards some

nameless and blood-curdling horror that is waiting for me at the bottom, but which I never reach.

Certainly, I reflected, as Rattigan and I tore down flight after flight, there was an extraordinary, a significant similarity in the rapid succession of disastrous events that had occurred on those stairs within the last twenty-four hours. It carried the ominous weight of a destined inevitability, an unescapable Fate. If anyone had told me that I should be the third victim, that my next descent in the darkness would also be my last, I should not have felt like arguing about it.

On the ground floor hall, at the foot of the stairs, we found a cluster of dressing-gowned folk grouped excitedly round a huddled figure on the tiled floor. They made way for us, and we looked down at all that was left of Curly. A cursory examination showed us that he was—had been, I suppose I should say—a powerfully built man in the thirties, with a bullet-head, and a heavy, primitive face. As the little jackal upstairs had said, the back of his skull was crushed in. I have seen too many violent deaths to be squeamish, but the sight of this fellow's head made me feel rather sick again.

"Now who in thunder," I reflected to myself, "can have done this?"

Rattigan had taken the torch from my hand, and was examining the stairs. He nudged me violently.

"'Tis plain how it happened," he said. "He tripped, somehow, and bumped his head

on the stairs: here's the place where he hit it, 'tis as plain as a cow's tail."

Almost indifferently I looked at the stain, black in the white disc of light, upon the white stone stair. "We'll go up again," I said, "and ring up for the police."

About forty people immediately began to ask us what had happened. I told them something of the truth, suppressing Mr. Covey's part in the business, and with many curious glances at us they melted away.

Upon the top landing, outside my door, I turned to Rattigan.

"Terry," I said grimly. "There's something I don't like about this. He was making his get-away; he slid down the banisters, as he did before, he overbalanced and fell, and crashed his head on the stairs. That's what it looks like, doesn't it? It was an accident, as these two other horrible deaths have been accidents. That's what that chuckle-headed inspector will tell me, when he comes—and we'll have to send for him. Death by misadventure. But I don't believe it."

"Yes, but look here," Rattigan argued. "I'm not very brainy, I know, but this looks clear. If he was the man who did the other fellows in, in these ingenious ways, who did *him* in, after the same method? See what I mean? It can't be the same hand each time, now. And who was there here to do it, anyway?"

"There never is anybody there to do it," I said, "in any of these cases. Of course, if it's the same man's work every time, it

wasn't Curly who did for poor Lorimer; he's probably nothing to do with the gang. But then, what did he want in my flat? For the love of Mike, Ratty, don't let's discuss it any more just now; my head won't stand it. We'll just have to ring up the police."

"Just a minute," Rattigan said. "We'll have to give this other fellow a chance to get away."

We went into the flat. There was no sign or sound of Mr. Covey. We went into every room; he was not to be seen anywhere.

Rattigan scratched his red head.

"'Tis queer, now," he said. "Where can he have got to? He couldn't have come down and slipped past us. He simply couldn't. All those people on the stairs—why, we simply had to push our way through."

I agreed.

"Anyway," I said, "I don't think he'd have risked it; the poor little worm hasn't got it in him."

Rattigan pondered.

"Maybe he went the way your first visitor did—down the rainpipe?"

I shook my head.

"I thought of that, but the sitting-room window is shut; all the windows are shut at the bottom. Nobody could get out on to the rainpipe and then close the window after him."

We were standing in the kitchen at the time. Terry's gaze went to a panel in the wall.

"What's that?" he asked, "and where does it lead to?"

"It's the service lift," I said. "You know,

there's a sort of open-sided box on a rope, you haul it up with your groceries in—By thunder, Ratty, I believe you've got it." I strode across the room and opened the panel upon an empty shaft. "That's it," I said. "A small man could curl himself up in that box, and lower himself down. That's the way Mr. Covey went, for sure. The ingenious little cuss." I turned away. "Now we'll ring up the police station. I hope to thunder that Jervis is off duty, I'm sick of the sight of that man's face."

XVIII

MY hope was vain. After ringing up, we went downstairs again to meet the police at the outer door. It was Jervis's unmistakable figure, followed by a helmeted one, that presently loomed out of the darkness of the courtyard.

"Another burglary, inspector," I said drily, "and another death by misadventure. I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything of the nature of a curse on my flat, or this staircase—or perhaps it's me. My ego may attract evil influences. . . ."

He ignored my sardonic pleasantries entirely. With the aid of his flash-lamp, an enormously powerful one, he examined the body.

"Curly Sothern," he said. "H'm. How did this happen, captain?"

"I didn't see it," I told him. "The evidence

seems to point to his having fallen downstairs and brained himself on the bottom step."

The inspector nodded absently.

"If you'll go back to your flat, gentlemen, I'll follow you in a moment, and take your statements."

Obediently we went upstairs. We were scarcely settled in chairs when the inspector joined us.

"Well?"

Briefly we told him the story of the burglary, suppressing all mention of Mr. Covey, and leaving it to be understood that Curly was alone.

"Oh. You chased him downstairs, and found him like this?"

"Not at all," I said hastily. "Mr. Rattigan didn't chase him, he was too busy trying to bring me round."

I saw a flicker in the inspector's hard eyes.

"Then how did you come to find Curly, at the bottom of the stairs?"

I nearly fell into this, only a flash of thought saved me.

"Why, Mr. Rattigan was going home—he doesn't live here, you know, inspector—and I was showing him out. We heard a hubbub going on down below, and ran down. When we came to the bottom we found a crowd of people, and the dead man."

Jervis nodded and frowned over his notebook. Then he looked up suddenly.

"Did you gentlemen go through Curly's pockets before you sent for me?"

"No," I said sharply. "Why?"

"Because I've just done so, and found nothing but a life preserver lying beside him. There was nothing in the man's pockets."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all. You'll excuse me asking the question I did, captain, I hope. You'll agree that to find nothing whatever in a man's pockets; not a copper, not a packet of fags, or a letter, or a pocket-knife, is—queer."

I gave him an imitation of his satirical smile.

"You admit at last, then, inspector, that there *is* something queer about all these goings-on?"

He almost scowled at me; appreciation of a joke against himself was not one of his most noticeable traits.

"I've never denied it, sir, to my knowledge. It *is* queer. But I say again, as I said before—Don't ask me to admit anything definite, and don't ask me to perform any miracles, till you've given me something to get my teeth into."

"There's yet another case," I told him, "that so far as I'm aware you know nothing about." And I told him what I had read about the man found in the field near Redruth. "And what," I challenged, "do you think about that?"

He eyed me steadily; his opaque eyes were inscrutable.

"I think it's queer," he said. "On the other hand, I've seen too much in my life to deny that coincidences do happen. And I want to tell you again, captain, that suspecting

a death wasn't accidental is one thing, and proving it was murder is another."

I nodded. I quite understood that.

"What about the Lorimer business?" I asked. "Did you make enquiries?"

"I did. I interviewed the porter here, and he says that a man answering to the description of Mr. Lorimer came here just after ten last night and asked which was your flat. The porter—Silk his name is—told him you'd gone out, so he said he'd come back later. Silk couldn't say if, or when, he did. He went to bed at eleven, and swears he didn't even hear anything until our ambulance arrived. He says he's a sound sleeper. He must be."

"You don't know where Lorimer went, I suppose?"

"Yes. That sort of enquiry, captain, isn't very difficult for us. He went straight down into the High Street, into the saloon bar of a pub there, and sat there till closing time over a small whisky."

I raised my eyebrows, this was unlike Cecil, though it was an obvious method of passing the time of waiting.

"He didn't talk to anybody?"

"Not a soul. And the porter didn't notice any suspicious characters hanging round here, either."

I swallowed this meekly.

"From eleven o'clock till nearly a quarter to twelve," I suggested. "It wouldn't take him all that time to get up here from the High Street."

"It didn't. He hung about the corner by

St. Mary Abbot's for half-an-hour. The man on point duty noticed him. And he walked up Church Street with the man on the beat."

To the inspector this seemed to explain everything, to me it was a most significant fact. It was the last thing in the world Cecil would be likely to do unless—I could not dismiss this reflection—unless he felt a need for protection.

"Also," the inspector said drily, "I interrogated—tactfully—the people living in the flats on the landing where he was found. Some of them were awake, though they had retired, and they heard no sound of anything resembling a scuffle, they heard no sound at all."

I had no comment to make on this, and just then a roaring sound came up the staircase-well.

"Here's the ambulance," said the inspector, and rose to his feet. "I must go down and see the corpse aboard. Good-night, gentlemen." He paused and turned. "We'll see you, captain, to-morrow afternoon, at the coroner's court."

It was after he had gone that Rattigan, who had been smoking in silence, suddenly said:

"I say, old man, I wonder if it *could* have been a plant?"

"What?" I asked.

"That fellow Covey coming up here again, and getting left alone in the flat while we went downstairs."

I shook my head.

"There was no plant about Curly," I said.

"I know. But—I'd have a look to see if Mr. Covey searched the place."

I did, but could find no sign that anything had been disturbed, or taken, until I realised—Yes, there was no doubt about it. The bureau had been opened, and either from habit or sheer instinct, or with some special purpose, when Mr. Bert Covey descended to ground level via the service lift he undoubtedly took with him Lorimer's gold watch.

XIX

THE inquest went much as I had expected. Brenda, whom Rattigan and I met on the steps of the court and took to the mortuary for the most terrible part of her ordeal, gave evidence of identification. Her pluck was amazing; she faced the coroner—a neat methodical-looking little person—calmly, answered his questions clearly, though there were times when her voice quivered. The taximan—he gave me a wink of recognition as he caught my eye—and I described the finding of Lorimer's body. The coroner put us some reasonable questions, the usual fussy fool of a jurymen put some ridiculous ones; we answered them to the apparent satisfaction of all concerned. Then came the medical evidence. Prendergast gave his. A genial, spectacled medico stated that he had carried out the post-mortem examination, and he

gave it as his considered and convinced opinion that the deceased had died from an aneurism of the heart.

Vansittart, with whom I had exchanged a few words before the inquest opened, did his best, but his questions were so very guarded that I began to get restless. And then, as my gaze roamed about the court, I noticed among the general public a face that, while so unremarkable as to be difficult to identify with certainty, was yet familiar. Unless I was very much mistaken, it was the businesslike-looking gentleman whom I had last seen at Paddington Station the day before, leaping aboard the one-thirty train to Redruth. At some point or other he had discovered that we had fooled him, and had come back. The coroner summed up the evidence, such as it was, and practically dictated a verdict of "Death from Natural Causes," which verdict the jury promptly brought in.

"Well?" Brenda asked as we left the court.

"I don't quite know," I admitted. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, one of the enemy is shadowing us. I want to get you back to Ealing without his knowing, and I can't see, off-hand, a sure and certain way of doing it."

I spoke in low tones, and cocked an eye sideways. The businesslike-looking man, a bowler hat upon his head, was unobtrusively edging his way towards us, obviously trying to get within earshot. I had a sudden fear that, even from where he had been standing, and softly as I had spoken, he might have caught the word "Ealing."

"Luncheon," I said loudly, and then dropping my voice murmured something that was absolute gibberish. The man in the bowler hat came to my very elbow. In an instant I whipped round, grabbed his wrist, and held him, just as Inspector Jervis, whom I had seen coming through the swing doors, approached.

"Hi, inspector," I hailed, "this fellow's been trying to pick my pocket."

The man went crimson, and tried furiously to drag his hand away.

"What the devil do you mean?" he blustered. "Pick your pocket? What the——"

"What's this, sir?" the inspector demanded, and his opaque eyes met mine in a challenging enquiry.

"Tried to pick my pocket," I insisted.

"I didn't," the man in the bowler protested. "I don't know why he should make such a charge, but I did nothing of the kind. I was just passing him——"

"You made straight for me," I said, "I was watching you. You deliberately came close to me——"

"That's right," said Rattigan. "He was over there, and then he came over here——"

The inspector looked dubious.

"Do you definitely give him in charge?"

"I do."

"If you're mistaken, you know, you'll be putting yourself in a very awkward position."

"I'll risk that. Do you refuse to take him in charge, inspector?"

Something like a grim smile momentarily lifted Jervis's heavy moustache.

"No, sir. But you'll have to come along to the station and charge him yourself."

"I will. Ratty, will you take Kitten to lunch somewhere? Ring me up, at the police station, and tell me where you are, and I'll join you."

"Righty-ho," quoth Rattigan happily, and hailed a passing taxi-cab.

The inspector, the man in the bowler, and myself walked round to the police-station in silence. But once in the charge-room my prisoner began to expostulate. He announced that he was a perfectly respectable business man, well known in the City; he gave the station-sergeant his card; he protested his innocence, and made a distinct impression by showing no animosity towards me, but insisting that I had made a mistake. The station-sergeant looked dubious, but, rather to my surprise, the inspector whispered a word or two in his ear, and he turned to the charge-book.

I gave my name and address and formulated the charge.

"Oh, very well," said the man in the bowler, "but you'll be sorry for this, all of you. You'll give me bail, inspector, I suppose?"

The inspector nodded: he could scarcely refuse.

"If you'll give me the address of a friend——"

The man in the bowler supplied a name and a telephone number. Then a constable took him away. The inspector, with a jerk of the head, beckoned me to the door.

"Look here, sir," he said, quietly but sternly, "I can't have you forcing my hand like this."

"Inspector," I said, "I apologise. But that fellow's shadowing us, tight." I described the incident at Paddington. "I want to get Miss Lorimer away without being followed, and I couldn't think of any other way of doing it."

"You'd no right to do anything of the kind, sir; making me a sort of catspaw—yet I couldn't let you down."

"Inspector," I said, "if there's a case in this—and I'm certain there is—you'll have reason to be grateful to me yet. In the meantime, he'll be out on bail in, I suppose, half-an-hour or so. By that time we'll be well away. You'll bring him up in the morning, I suppose; I shan't appear; the charge'll drop and he'll be let off."

"And bring an action against us for wrongful arrest."

"He may—in which case I'll indemnify you. But I don't think he will, inspector, I really don't think he will."

I grinned cheerfully at him, and I saw in return the very faintest suspicion of a twinkle in his hard eyes.

"One other thing," I said, "I suppose he'll be searched; as a matter of form?"

"He could be."

"Well, if there's anything on him like a torn fragment of paper——"

"If there is, captain, I'll let you know. But you can take it from me that there isn't."

If you're right, and there's a gang trying to get hold of those mysterious papers that nobody's seen or knows anything about"—his scepticism was scornful—"and they've got the other half of that message, you can be quite certain they're not carrying it about with 'em."

"I agree with you," I said, "but I'm not letting any chances slip." I offered him a cigarette. "I suppose, inspector, you'll want me for the inquest on Mr. Curly Sothern?"

He nodded.

"Yes, but it won't be yet. I'll let you know." He made an impatient movement.

"There's one other thing I'd like you to do for me. Most probably we shall have to go to Cornwall at a moment's notice. But there's the—the funeral. If—it—could wait at the mortuary a day or two——"

He nodded gravely, and for an instant I sensed a sympathy, a consideration, that I had scarcely hoped for.

"Don't worry about that, captain. I'll make it all right for you. Well——"

"Well," I said, "You won't mind my hanging about here till my friend rings up and tells me where we're having luncheon, will you?"

He stared at me solemnly.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, and I felt that he was bestowing a compliment, "if you won't mind my saying so, for sheer, cool, brazen cheek, you're about the frozen limit."

XX

RATTIGAN'S call came through in a few minutes. He and Brenda were at a small, obscure restaurant in Soho. I got a taxi and went off to join them without loss of time.

I found them at a little table in a corner, apparently getting on together splendidly and thoroughly enjoying each other's society. Something of the wistful sadness had gone from the girl's eyes; she was smiling indulgently at him, as she had never smiled at me. Of course, Terry was far nearer her own age than I——

"Hullo, Uncle Jack," she said, and for the first time I disliked the mock relationship.

"Come in, skipper," said Rattigan boisterously. "We've left something for you."

"We've got to be quick," I said. "That fellow's only jugged for about half-an-hour; he'll be out on bail in a few minutes from now, and scouring London for us. We've got to settle what we're to do."

"Anyway, eat while we talk."

"Uncle Jack," Brenda said, anxiety in her voice, "Mr. Rattigan's been telling me about last night. How's your head?"

"A bit tender," I admitted, drinking soup. "But that's nothing. Look here, I'm a bit afraid that Bowler Hat overheard me say 'Ealing.'"

"I hope he did," she said coolly, "because I'm not going back there."

I lifted my eyebrows at her.

"I'm not," she declared mutinously. "I'm not going to be switched into a—what-d'you-call-it?—a siding with Aunt Hattie while all this is going on. I'm going home—to Roseveare to hunt for those papers. Oh—" her voice became grave—"I know what you're thinking: about leaving daddy here—but *he* isn't here, you know; it's only his poor body; and I'm sure he wants me to do—what I'm going to do. And it will only take a few hours."

I really did not quite know what to say to this.

"I don't see how we're going to find them," I objected at last, "without the other half of the clue."

"Well," she said, "I can't see anything else to do. It doesn't seem to me that your sitting in your flat like a spider waiting for flies is going to work, Uncle Jack. If it hadn't been for Mr. Rattigan last night—" Her eyes suddenly went grave, and she gave a little shudder. "What I'm thinking is this—We don't know what's in the other half of the message, and I think you're quite right in your guess that they're desperately keen to get our half, but—they *might* decide to make a search on what they've got; they may be doing it at this very moment, while we're wasting time up here, they may find the papers, and——"

She paused for a moment.

"I don't think you quite understand, Uncle Jack, how I feel about those papers. For one thing, I feel that it was poor daddy's

dying wish that they should be found and dealt with as you think best. And there's another thing. We don't know what the papers are about, but—well, you know that daddy was deep in some chemical experiments; if they're anything to do with anything of that kind, it may mean a certain amount of money. That may account for daddy's anxiety about them, he may have known that they would mean a little money for me. Apart from that—well, I don't know, but I don't think he can have left me very much. I think I shall be—” she made a little embarrassed gesture—“dreadfully up against it.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I see all that and more. While those papers are lost, Kitten, I feel sure you're in definite danger. Once they're found, and restored to their owner, or dealt with in some way, the danger ceases. So I'm all for finding them as quickly as we possibly can.”

“That's the stuff,” said Rattigan. “Let's all go down to this Roseveare place, skipper.”

“It seems quite the best plan. Only—you can't come down with us, Kitten, without a chaperon.”

She dimpled and made a little gurgling noise, expressive, I suppose, of amusement.

“If you insist, dear uncle, I suppose I must. Well, what's the matter with dear old Aunt Hattie?”

“If she'll come.”

“She'll love it. She's sick of Ealing.”

“And the pack of hounds!” I exclaimed.

“By thunder, Kitten, you've hit it. If she'll

bring the pack, we'll have the best bodyguard in the world. Will she?"

"Will she not! The only thing that would deter her from coming would be separation from Achilles, Hector, Menelaus, Ajax and Paris."

"Is that what she calls them?" asked Rattigan, his eyes and mouth wide open. "Good God!"

"Then we'll get away as quickly as we can," I said. "Of course, they'll look for us at Roseveare as soon as they miss us from London, but we want to get a start on them if we can. Is there a telephone here?"

"Yes," Terry said. "In the lobby, there."

"Right. You ring up Aunt Hattie, Kitten, and tell her to get packed up as quickly as she can. Ratty, you cut out and hire a car—a big car—and have it brought round here. Is there a back entrance?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Find out, and if there is, have the car brought to it. Meanwhile, I'll finish my lunch."

XXI

BRENDA came back from the telephone to say that Aunt Hattie was "as bucked as a bear" at the prospect of taking her Alsatians to Cornwall, and seemed neither surprised nor agitated at being asked to pack at a moment's notice for immediate departure.

"That's just like her," Brenda explained. "If the end of the world came suddenly, Aunt Hattie would only say 'Dear me, I'd better put my walking shoes on.' You simply can't rattle her. It's a pose, of course, but she sticks to it, whatever happens."

Rattigan emerged from the door to the kitchen regions.

"Here we are," he said. "I've got a young charabanc at the back door, skipper, and I've squared it with *signor il patrone* to slip out that way. Also, I've paid the bill."

We went through a narrow, dark passage that smelt of oily cooking, and out into a back street. A big, powerful, seven-seater car was waiting, with a smart, intelligent-looking driver at the wheel. We embarked. I took the seat beside the driver and in a low tone gave him Aunt Hattie's address.

"I say," Rattigan whispered, leaning over the back of the seat, "what about fetching our respective shaving tackles?"

"No time," I told him. "We'll have to have them sent on after us."

All through the run across to Ealing I glanced about me for signs of pursuit, but could see none. Eventually we pulled up before a small but solidly built Victorian house in a street just off the Common. As Brenda and I went quickly up the path, the front door opened, and Aunt Hattie appeared.

She was a large, broad-shouldered woman of absolutely indeterminate age, with a weather-beaten skin, hard features, and an air of challenge. Her grey hair was cropped short,

she wore tweed clothes and a man's hat, and she was performing the feat of holding simultaneously, on five separate leads, five of the best-grown Alsations I have ever seen.

"This Captain Carmichael?" she asked Brenda, and then jerked her head at me. "Afternoon. The bags are in the hall."

I went in, picked up a couple of suitcases that lay on the tiled floor, and came out again, pulling the door to after me.

"Maid's out," said Aunt Hattie, "but I left a note explaining. She'll understand."

She marched down the path like a guardsman, the Alsations trotting before her in an orderly and well drilled fashion.

"This your car?" she demanded of me, jerking out her chin.

"No," I explained. "It's hired for the occasion."

"Cheaper," said Aunt Hattie. "Where do I put the dogs?"

She induced the animals to curl up on the floor of the car, between the folding seats and the suitcases. Brenda, Aunt Hattie and Rattigan fitted into the back seat. I seated myself beside the driver. Then we set off—I believed unobserved.

Rattigan had chosen the car with a discriminating eye. Never have I travelled in a vehicle that ate up the miles so smoothly and with less feeling of speed. We ran through Basingstoke and Salisbury to Shaftesbury, and there stopped for a hasty tea. Away again, and on the deepening dusk through Sherborne, Chard and Honiton to Exeter. Here the

driver pulled up and turned to me for instructions.

"You'll want to go by Plymouth, I suppose, sir?" he asked. "The moorland roads are a bit more direct, but I don't think they'd be quicker in the end, and they're not too good in the dark. The Tavistock road goes right over Dartmoor, and the Okehampton one takes you across Bodmin Moor."

Neither seemed to me a suitable road for us in the circumstances, although I had been unable to detect any sign that we were being followed.

"No, the Plymouth Road," I said, "and we'll stop at the George for dinner."

We did, and took aboard enough food for supper when we arrived and breakfast next morning. Then we went on in the darkness, through Callington and Liskeard, Lostwithiel, St. Austell, and Truro. At last, as we were running towards the environs of a town, Brenda reached forward and touched my arm.

"That's Redruth," she said to me and the driver collectively. "Our turning's just this side of it; we must be nearly upon it; there's a sign-post—Ah, there it is. Round there."

We swung round and jolted into a narrow, badly-metalled lane. I could see in the glare of the headlights that it was deep-sunk, with a bank on either side topped by a wall of slate flakes. Also it was almost incredibly winding, there seemed hardly a straight stretch upon it, nothing but one bend after another. Our driver slowed down to twenty, and kept the horn going almost incessantly, but even so——

Even so we swung round one bend too fast to pull up when we saw, completely blocking the road in front of us, a large farm wagon full of loose hay. There was no room to swerve; our driver jammed on his brakes hard, and hit the rear of the wagon fair and square. It seemed to collapse on the impact, and the car went plunging into the middle of a tangle of shattered and splintered wood and tumbling hay.

I jumped out and moved along the side of the cart, expecting to meet an abusive Cornish wagoner. Instead, as I reached the front of it, out of the beam of the car's headlights, something hot and stifling dropped, apparently straight out of the sky, over my head and shoulders, and an instant later the weight of a heavy body bore me to the ground. I could not shout, with any hope of being heard, for the sack enveloped my head. I tried to struggle, but my arms were pinioned. I felt myself lifted from the ground, by at least two pairs of hands, and carried towards the side of the road.

And then I was dropped with a bump that made my teeth rattle, and there was no longer any pinioning grip upon me. I lifted my hands, and with something of a struggle pulled the heavy sack off my head. The white light of a torch flashed into my eyes, blinding me, and Rattigan's voice said:

"So there you are, then. What happened skipper?"

I told him. He whistled.

"They're a pretty cool crowd, our friends. Why, I was almost at your heels. I heard

a queer noise, and I hurried up—just in time to see two tripe-hounds pulling you off towards the hedge. When I arrived they legged it—and 'tis too dark to think of following them—but I got one of them a most beautiful sock in the eye."

"It just shows," I said, "that in this pitch darkness we'd better stick together. I say, the car—we'd better go back."

"I think not," Rattigan said coolly. "They can't do anything there, against Miss Lorimer, and the shover, *and* Aunt Hattie, *and* the dawgs. Come on and let's have a look at this haycart, now."

We walked all round the vehicle; there was no horse in the shafts; it seemed to be abandoned in the middle of the road, completely blocking the way.

"That's rather done us," I commented.

Rattigan rubbed his nose.

"The only thing—Wait a minute, now. Give me a bunk up to the top. I want to investigate."

He clambered on to the shaft of the cart, and I heaved him upward on to the top of the hay. I heard him jumping about. Presently he came down again.

"Nobody there," he said. "No eavesdroppers. Let's go back to the car."

We went. We discovered that the driver had backed the car, and but for a crumpled wing, it was undamaged.

"Well?" Aunt Hattie demanded tersely. "What's the matter?"

"Ssh!" Rattigan implored. "Speak low."

"Whatever for?" she asked, deliberately raising her voice.

"Because there are bad lads abroad this night: they may even be listening from yonder darkness in the middle distance, and I don't want 'em to hear what we say."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Aunt Hattie. "You're trying to frighten me."

"I'd not do any such thing. I'm telling you the truth. They bonneted the skipper with a potato sack and as near as anything got away with him."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Aunt Hattie.

"Well, will you do this for us—will you keep quiet while we talk?"

"Tcha!" Aunt Hattie snorted indignantly, and relapsed into silence.

"The whole thing is," I explained in low tones, "this is obviously a trap to delay us—I don't quite know why, but possibly while they search the house. Our opponents, whoever they are, expect us to go back to Redruth and leave the ground clear for them. I vote we do nothing of the kind. I vote we leave the car—the driver can take it back to a garage in Redruth—and push on on foot, if it isn't too far——" I looked interrogatively at Brenda.

"It's not more than a mile and a half," she assured me in a whisper.

"Good. Then—shall we?"

"I'll be very glad to stretch my legs," said Aunt Hattie, "and I'm sure my little pets will."

"Right-ho. But remember—the great thing is to keep close together."

I gave the driver instructions, and we disembarked the Alsatians, Brenda and Aunt Hattie, and the suitcases and baskets of food. The dogs sniffed the ground and the air, as if eliciting information by these means, but remained perfectly quiet and still.

"Right," I said. "Now come to the side of the road—keep in the darkness—while he backs her out."

They obeyed implicitly, and we waited in silence while the driver put the car into reverse and sped backwards up the hill. We watched his headlights grow smaller and fainter, then swing round like searchlights as he turned at a gateway. Then, carrying the baggage, we set out through the darkness, past the hay cart and away along the narrow, sunken, curving road towards Roseveare, the Alsatians trotting at Aunt Hattie's heels.

XXII

THROUGHOUT that long trudge along the winding road, we saw no sign, heard no sound, of anyone but ourselves. None of us spoke: of what Rattigan and Aunt Hattie were thinking I had no idea, and my own thoughts were confused—though chiefly my mind was keyed up to participating in imminent conflict of some kind—but I

could guess something of Brenda's emotions as we advanced down that familiar road towards the house where so often she had found her father waiting for her—the house that we should now find cold, empty, and desolate.

So dark was the night that we came upon the place with startling suddenness. At one moment, as we dipped down into a hollow, there seemed nothing on either side of us but ragged walls of slate flakes; the next, we had come to a wooden gate, and beyond it stood a low, long house, with walls of white-washed slate, and a slated roof, and a squat chimney stack at either end.

In silence we passed through the gateway and up the path. I felt Brenda's small, gloved hand creep into mine and I held it tightly. Poor child, this was a sad business for her. Yet in the midst of my sympathy I felt a little thrill of satisfaction, of delight, that she turned to me for comfort.

A little walled porch shielded the front door, and into it we crowded while Brenda, by the light of my torch, searched in her handbag for the key and the Alsatians sniffed the ground and fidgeted impatiently. Inserting the key in the lock, she opened the door. A dark, damp cavity, that had already acquired the musty smell of a disused house, faced us.

"We'd better go in first," I said to Rattigan.
"Just in case—If the ladies will wait here——"
"Stuff and nonsense," said Aunt Hattie.
"We shall be frozen if we stand here in this cold wind. What are you afraid of?"

She stooped and slipped the leash from the biggest Alsatian. "Go on, Ajax!" she said, and the dog bounded forward into the darkness of the hall. Menelaus, Paris, Achilles and Hector followed him, their feet pattering on the flagged floor.

"Find 'em, boys!" Aunt Hattie commanded, and the animals disappeared away into the back regions, and up the steep, narrow stairs to the upper floor. "If there is anyone here, which I don't believe," Aunt Hattie said, "the boys'll find 'em."

"This is the sitting-room," Brenda said, in a flat, dull voice, and opened a door on our left. "There ought to be a lamp——"

Switching on our torches, Rattigan and I went in, and at the first fragmentary glimpse in the jumping white beams of light we stared and looked towards each other. Litter and confusion was everywhere. I found the lamp and lighted it, and in the dull yellow gleam surveyed the room. There was no doubt about it, somebody had ransacked the place thoroughly. A desk in the corner had been broken open, its drawers dragged out and emptied, everything thrown upon the floor; a bookcase had been emptied, and the books flung about anyhow; the carpet was in waves, as if it had been taken up and put down carelessly; it looked as if not one square inch of the room had escaped the search.

"Untidy!" Aunt Hattie snorted indignantly.

I glanced at Brenda, there were tears in her eyes as she looked at the scene of desecration, and her lips were quivering.

"The first thing," I said, "is food, and something hot to drink. Come and show me where the kitchen is, Kitten, and I'll get a fire going. Rattigan, bring those baskets of grub along, will you? Miss Winterton——"

"I'm going to tidy up this disgraceful mess," said Aunt Hattie. "Brenda will come back and help me."

The kitchen grate was full of ashes, and I commenced to rake them out while Brenda returned to the sitting-room and Rattigan, picking up a thick stick from a rack in the hall, commenced to explore the rest of the house. I had raked out quite a shovelful of ashes before I realised that although there was not the faintest red glow among them, they were still warm. Whoever had ransacked the house had lighted a fire here, and they had not been gone very many hours.

By the time the kettle was boiling, and I had laid out a couple of trays of crockery, Rattigan came back into the room, stooping in the low doorway.

"Painstaking little fellers, our friends," he said. "They've been through the house with a fine-tooth comb, upstairs and down. Everything's been turned upside down and inside out."

I looked at him.

"I wonder if they found what they were after?"

He shook his head.

"Can't say. If they have—we can't do anything about it. They'll be miles away by now. If not——" He paused and dropped

his voice. "I believe we'll be in for a warmish time. I think we ought to get the womenfolk away, skipper; we ought not to have brought 'em here, really."

"Can you see 'em going?" I asked.

He grinned wryly.

"You're right. I'm afraid I can't. But it's a nuisance, they hamper a feller so in a scrap. Yet I suppose they're safer with us than parked somewhere alone. Your kettle's boiling."

I made the tea, and he and I carried the trays into the sitting-room. Already Aunt Hattie and Brenda had brought it to some kind of order, and the occupation had steadied the girl.

"Young man," said Aunt Hattie, with her mouth full of meat pie, "I believe I owe you an apology. It really does look, I must say, as if someone has been here who had no right to."

I caught Brenda's eye and grinned.

"It suggests," Aunt Hattie went on, taking another bite, "that this extraordinary idea of yours about poor Cecil having hidden some important document may be true—though I'd like to know what it can be."

"So would we," I said drily.

"*But*," she went on, with a sort of truculent defiance, "all this talk about their going about murdering people—I don't believe it. Such things don't happen. Sakes alive, where are we? In modern England, or in some foreign place in the Dark Ages?"

It was perfectly useless to argue with her.

"Oh well," I said. "We'll see."

"All the same," Rattigan suggested uneasily. "Wouldn't it have been better to post a sentry, skipper?"

"Stuffanonsense," said Aunt Hattie emphatically. "If there's anybody snooping about, the dogs will hear him long before any of us could: they'll scent him before he's near enough to be heard."

"Yes," I admitted, "there's something in that. Well——"

"Well, as soon as we've finished supper," Aunt Hattie declared, lifting her teacup, "Brenda and I are going to tidy up the bedrooms and air the beds, and then I'm going to get some sleep."

"I want to start the search *now*," Brenda complained.

For once I supported Aunt Hattie.

"Much better get a good night's rest," I said. "This may be a long job, and we've got to keep fresh. Besides, it's dark: much better wait for daylight."

XXIII

FROM the landing window over the porch I watched the dawn faintly flush the sky, and the pale grey light slowly reveal a landscape of bare undulating fields divided by grey slate walls. I could not see a tree;

nothing broke the monotony of dull-coloured grass but some outcrops of grey rock here and there. It was one of the most dismal and depressing landscapes I had ever viewed, and to make it worse, a light drizzle, blown by the wind, began to fall.

Rattigan and I had decided that, hounds or no hounds, we would be wise to keep watch. Our first essential was to guard against a night attack. He had taken the first half of the night, patrolling the house inside and out. At two in the morning he had roused me and I had taken my turn of shivering sentry-go. The Alsatians, who seemed to have accepted both him and myself as friends and allies, had silently accompanied each of us on every step of our patrol, lying down when we stood still, rising eagerly whenever we moved. They inspected, with much sniffing, the shed in which Brenda had garaged her little car, and the laboratory adjoining it, and explored the neglected patch of kitchen garden at the back. All through the night no suspicious sound had reached our ears: nothing but the sigh of the wind, rising and falling, over the bare slopes of the low hills.

"Well, now," said Rattigan at breakfast, "what do we do next?"

"We don't know," I explained, "if those fellows found the papers or not. If they did—well, as you say, we can do nothing about it. But we don't know, and I think our best plan is to assume that they didn't, and do a little searching for ourselves."

"If they'd found 'em," Aunt Hattie

demanded, "would they have blocked the road against us last night?"

"They might still have been searching, and wanted to delay us."

Rattigan nodded.

"The great thing," he said, "is to try and see into the other fellows' minds. I bet the skipper's right. Now assuming that they haven't found the things, what'll they do?"

"Come again," Brenda said.

"I doubt it. From indications so far, I deduce that our friends have a disinclination to being seen. If they started combing the house with us in it, we'd be getting under their feet and they'd trip over us—unless they mean to make a real attack, and if they had they'd have done it last night."

"Unless they're waiting for reinforcements," I hinted.

"That's possible, of course. But I don't believe they'll do anything so crude as a frontal attack. I think they'll exercise the higher strategy—they'll let *us* do the searching, while they keep an eye on us from a distance, and when we discover the hidden treasure and try to get away with it, then there'll be trouble."

I looked at him with a new respect.

"Ratty," I told him, "you said what our American cousins call a mouthful. That's just about what they will do. Now can we find the papers, and if so can we do it, and get them away, without their knowing?"

"That," said Rattigan, "is what we're going to find out."

"In the meantime," said Aunt Hattie,

pushing away a plate that shortly before had held three rashers and two fried eggs, "if we're staying here, we've got to eat. I don't mind for myself, but my boys have eaten all their biscuits, and by luncheon time they'll want to get their teeth into some good bones."

"That's arranged for," I told her. "The man who drove us down last night had orders to go to the place in Redruth where Brenda garaged her car, and tell them to send a man out with the car and some rations."

"H'm," said Aunt Hattie. "How'll he get? Is he going to shift that cartload of hay?"

"He'll come the other way, by Polgleaze," Brenda said.

"You haven't thought it out badly," Aunt Hattie conceded grudgingly. "But if it were *my* house that had been turned upside down in this disgusting way, *I* should inform the police."

"We will," I agreed, "but I'm very much afraid that all we shall get is polite incredulity and a promise that the man on the beat—probably a beat of twenty miles or so—will keep an eye on the place."

We all set to, doing the morning's housework, and all of us at times paused to scan the undulating skyline around, and the tops of the walls, but not once did anything in the faintest degree resembling a human head appear, until about ten, and then, as I was bringing up coals from the shed, a voice hailed me from the far end of the garden. I looked up. A dark man in a chauffeur's cap was sitting astride the wall.

"Hey!" he called.

I marched up the garden towards him, but as soon as I was within comfortable earshot he called out, in tones of agitated alarm:

"Don't 'ee come no nearer, then. You just stay where you be."

"What on earth do you mean?" I demanded. "Who the devil are you?"

"I'm Paul Tregenna, from Julian's, up to Redruth. I've brought Miss Lorimer's car, and the things from the stores. You'll find un on the road, but all the tyres is gone, because the road down under's all broken glass and nails, and they'm in ribbons. I did the last mile on the rims."

"But why in thunder didn't you bring it right up to the house?"

A look of extraordinary cunning, mixed with alarm, came into his face.

"Not me," he responded. "Not after what the man told I. I don't come no nearer, and don't 'ee try to catch I, neither."

"What man?" I challenged. "What did he tell you?"

"You do know," he answered reprovingly. "'Tis no good purtending you don't. I did wonder why you wanted all they pervisions, but now I know, and I'll tell everybody to keep away from here."

"What man?" I persisted.

"A man who stopped I down below there as I was coming along. A foreigner, I'd say, but he knew all about the business, and he warned I."

"What kind of man?"

"Why, I couldn't tell 'ee, mister. Just an ordinary man, then."

"And what in thunder did he tell you?"

"Why, that you'd got the smallpox to here, that's why you came down along from England, so's you wouldn't have to be shut up in hospital. No, don't 'ee come no nearer, I'm not taking any chances, me with a wife and five childer."

"Look here——" I said, taking a step forward.

But he jumped down from the wall and vanished from sight. I raced up the garden and vaulted over the wall into the field beyond, but I could see no sign of Mr. Paul Tregenna. Presumably he was legging it along under cover of one of the right-angled walls either to left or right. I jumped over the left hand one, and saw no sign of him. I went back and climbed the right hand one: no one in view. I ran to the end of the field and looked over the next wall, but the dark man from Redruth had disappeared.

As I went back to the house I reflected on the ingenuity of our opponents in circulating a story that fitted in curiously with the fact of our having imported food to last us some time, and one that would ensure the local peasantry giving us a wide berth. I also reflected that the strategic position of the house, with all these walls offering unlimited opportunity for watching and for approach and retreat, unobserved, was thoroughly unsound.

XXIV

"THAT'S cute of the enemy," Rattigan said, when I told him what had happened. "It means that people will give us a wide berth: we shan't be able to get a soul to come near us. If we want any more grub, we'd better fix up a leper stone at the end of the garden."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "I think they've over-reached themselves a bit. If this rumour spreads we shall have the Medical Officer of Health down on us in two ticks. And that puts us in touch with the outer world at once."

"If the said M.O.H. does his job," Rattigan answered dubiously. "They don't, always, in benighted parts like these. Well, what do we do now?"

"We go and get the car and the grub," I said. "That's the first thing."

"Both of us?"

"Well, I'd feel happier if one of us stayed with the ladies—notwithstanding Menelaus & Co."

"Right," he said briskly. "I'll go."

From the front door I watched him march down the road, and out of sight round the bend, and I don't mind admitting that I was pretty much on edge, and my hand was in the side pocket of my jacket where my revolver lay. But in a few minutes I heard the sound of Brenda's little car approaching, and saw

it come bumping, on its flat tyres, round the bend of the road. Rattigan brought it to the gate, and together we unloaded the stores in the back and carried them into the house.

The womenfolk came to help, and Aunt Hattie, with a grunt of approval, pounced upon a bag of dog-biscuits and a parcel of bones. She and her classically-named pack retired to the yard, leaving the rest of us to carry on.

"And the next step, Uncle Jack?" Brenda asked, when the rations were stored in the larder.

"I'm very curious to know," I said, "whether our friends would try to stop us getting out of here. I'm very tempted to have a shot at it just to see. But I feel it would be rather a waste of time at the moment. I think the urgent thing is to find those papers. We don't want to go till we've got them: when we have, it will be time to see about getting out."

"Hear, hear," said Rattigan.

"Very well," Brenda said. "Perhaps you'd like to make a start, while I get luncheon. I wish we could get hold of Mrs. Pasco—the old char, you know—but I'm afraid she wouldn't come."

"I'm dead certain she wouldn't," I agreed. "But we hope we shan't have to stay here long."

Rattigan and I went into the study, and I visualised that fragment of torn paper that was the only clue we had.

" John have hid . . .
wall " . . . or " well "
feet down north side . . .
find them do . . .
Best take care o . . . "

I recited it aloud.

" Ratty," I said, " I'm afraid it's not going to be easy. Poor Lorimer said ' hidden *well* ' ; he seemed to stress that. It points to his having found some really good hiding-place for the papers."

" Rattigan nodded.

" ' Feet *down* . . . ' " he said thoughtfully. " It suggests it's buried somewhere, doesn't it, now ? "

" Yes," I agreed, " but I feel that it's not buried in the ground, but concealed in a recess in a wall, on the north side."

" Just a minute," he said. He went to the door and hailed Brenda. " Where'll we find a pick and shovel, now ? " he asked. She came to us, wonder in her eyes.

" We haven't any," she said. " We've no tools of that kind at all."

" That settles it," I cried. " Lorimer couldn't have buried the things in the ground without digging-tools. They must be hidden in a wall, as I've felt all along. But what wall ? "

Terry shook his head.

" I'm afraid this sort of thing's not my long suit, skipper. The only thing I can suggest is that we try *every* north wall, inside and out. What I mean, it might not be the

north wall of the house, but the north wall of a room, a partition wall. We'd better do them systematically."

"I'm wondering," I said, "if it's in the house at all. There's that shed in the garden that poor Cecil used as a laboratory. I'm inclined to think he might look on that as a safe place—safe because rather unlikely."

He shook his head again.

"I doubt it. I think he'd be likely to keep it as near him as possible. Instinct, you know."

I considered this.

"There's something in what you say, Ratty," I admitted. "Anyway, we're working in the dark: I don't suppose it matters much where we start, so long as we're systematic about it. Let's go up to the top rooms and run the rule over every north wall."

So we commenced our search. We began with the left hand bedroom at the back of the house. Minutely we examined the whole surface of the papered wall, but could find no trace that it had been disturbed in any way, no suggestion of a hiding-place of any description. We examined the floorboards along the foot of the wall, but it was quite clear that none of them had been disturbed for years. By the time we had satisfied ourselves that nothing was hidden in that wall, Brenda was calling that luncheon was ready, and we went down.

After the meal we started again, this time with Brenda to help us. We worked as quickly as was consistent with scrupulous

care, and by tea time we had scrutinised every inch of every north wall in the house. By the time tea was over dusk had fallen and it was plain that we had to spend at least one more night in Trewerry House.

"Skipper," Rattigan said sadly, "I'm not grouching, and your staff work is good, but I wish when you'd given the shover his shopping list you'd included a toothbrush and some pyjamas and a few shirts and collars and hankies."

"War's a horrible thing," I reminded him. "On a show like this you must expect to put up with unspeakable privations."

"Uncle Jack," Brenda said, "do you think it will be safe to examine the outside walls in the dark, with a flashlamp? Or do you think the enemy may take pot-shots at us?"

"It sounds like asking for trouble," Rattigan said. "Don't much fancy it myself."

"I'm not sure about it," I told them. "The impression I've got of our friends is that they don't stick at murder and sudden death, but they have conscientious objections to making a mess. If our guesses are right about the people who have died since this business began, they've all been killed in circumstances that justify any jury in bringing in 'natural causes' or 'misadventure.' That doesn't cover night-shooting. But I don't think we'd be wise to search out of doors in the dark. We've got to go easy with the flashlamps. A time may come when we shall need them badly. The batteries won't last for ever, and we don't stand much chance of

getting refills. No, from every point of view we'd better postpone the out-of-doors inspection till the early morning. In the meantime, we'll nose round the inside of the house a bit, and I suggest we go to bed early."

We went on with our search of the house, tapping walls and floors, scrutinising every inch of their surfaces, but without finding anywhere a trace of disturbance of any kind. Aunt Hattie, at first silently scornful, at last became infected with our particular variety of treasure-huntitis and plumping down on her knees, pawed and peered with the rest. Her hounds followed suit, sniffing and whining and scratching, pausing every now and again to look up at us as if asking what scentless kind of a rat we were seeking, and generally getting very badly in our way.

We adjourned for supper, and then, less with any real hope of finding anything—for we were all convinced by now that the secret was not hidden within the house—than to pass the time, we went on with our search.

XXV

IT must have been about eight o'clock that Menelaus, who believed he was assisting me to examine the flooring of a cupboard under the stairs, suddenly stiffened and cocked his ears. I sat back on my heels, watching him. His hackle rose erect, his lips drew

back silently, exposing an exceptionally businesslike set of teeth, I saw his whole body quivering, and heard a growl, so low and deep as to be almost inaudible, begin to rumble deep down in his throat. That was all I heard; whatever sound had attracted his attention was inaudible to my human ears.

And then, with a suddenness that made me jump, he was thundering along the hall to the front door, barking in sharp, harsh detonations that were positively painful to the ear. An instant later, there came the sound of scurrying paws and thrusting bodies, and Achilles and Paris came hurtling down the stairs, Hector and Ajax from the back regions, and turned the din into pandemonium.

As I reached the front door, Brenda came out of the study; she looked a little pale in the light of the hanging lamp, but her lips were firm and her eyes steady.

She asked me something, but I could not hear a word. She came nearer and put her lips to my ear.

"What is it, Uncle Jack?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," I shouted. "The dogs have heard something, but I don't know what. I'm going to see."

"Uncle Jack!" I felt her fingers close anxiously upon my arm.

"It's all right," I assured her. "I'm not taking any chances. Where's Rattigan?"

"Aye, aye, sir," said his voice behind me.

"Right," I said. "Go into the study, put

out the light, go to the window, and cover the porch doorstep. If you see anything you don't like, smash the glass and let fly. Brenda, put out this light, please. I don't want to be a nice, easy silhouette when I open the door. No, I'll be all right. I've got my shooter and a torch, and the faithful hounds."

I opened the door a little, and then it was torn from my hands and flung back as the canine torrent surged through and out into the garden. I followed quickly, peering into the darkness. I could see nothing at first, and then as my eyes focussed, I made out a motionless black patch between me and the vague, ghostly shape of the little white gate, other black patches moving erratically round it. Then a high, clear, precise voice, a voice that was not altogether unfamiliar, called smoothly :

"Do you mind calling these dogs off? They won't let me pass."

I pressed the switch of my lamp, and projected a beam of white light at the spot where I calculated the speaker's face would be. My aim was a little low, and at the first glance I saw nothing but the figure of a small man in a dark overcoat, entirely surrounded by Alsatians. The dogs had apparently been well trained; they would not attack a man without orders, but by encircling him threateningly they effectively held him where he stood.

I lifted the beam a little higher, and shone it upon a small, wrinkled, slightly side-whiskered face, starred with a pair of ferrety eyes. For

a moment I stared, knowing that I had seen that face before, yet unable to place it. Then recognition came, the man in the path was my legal visitor of two days before—Mr. Kesteven, of Messrs. Leslie & Lucas.

“Well,” I challenged, “and what can I do for you?”

“Oh, is that Captain Carmichael?” he asked (apparently he recognised my voice instantly). “Do you mind calling off your dogs?”

“Well, you see,” I explained, “they’re not my dogs, and I doubt if they’ll obey any orders of mine. I’m afraid I’ll have to call their owner before they’ll let you go.”

“I should be infinitely obliged,” he said smoothly, yet with an icy note in his voice, “if you would.”

“Possibly. But first of all, I’d like to know the object of your visit.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I shouldn’t have thought that would be necessary. I haven’t come from London to pay a mere friendly call. At our previous meeting, Captain Carmichael, I asked you to give me certain papers, and you assured me that you hadn’t them. I believed you then—and I believe you still. I learnt last night that you had left London hurriedly; I discovered that you had come here. Obviously you spoke the truth when you said you had not those papers in your possession; obviously you have come here to find them.”

“Well?” I asked.

Again he shrugged his shoulders.

"If you have already found them, I entreat you to give them to me; if you haven't discovered their hiding-place, I implore you to let me come in and help you look for them."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Captain Carmichael," he said earnestly, "I think I've already explained to you how infinitely valuable those papers are to my client. I've tried to make you understand that if they were to get into the wrong hands, it would be nothing less than a national calamity. I assure you that I will leave no stone unturned——"

I interrupted him.

"You appear to have turned one or two already," I said. "You killed Andrew Tresilian, or had him killed, but the papers weren't on him; you killed Cecil Lorimer, but you didn't find them—only half the clue to where he'd hidden them; you hired Monkey Ted, and Joe Covey and Curly Sothern to raid my flat; you killed Curly—I don't know why. You have me shadowed like a pick-pocket, when I come down here you block the road, and when I reach here I find that the house has been turned inside out. You strew the other road with glass and nails to cripple any car that tries to get through, you spread this crazy rumour that we've smallpox here—and then you have the consummate impudence to stroll in here, as cool as a salad, and ask me to give you the blessed papers."

"Good God!" he blurted out, consternation in his voice. For an instant he seemed unable to say any more. "I heard about the small-

pox, of course," he went on, "but I thought you had spread the story yourself. I wondered about the cart—it's forced me to walk the last mile or so of the way here—but I believed that, too, was your own doing—to prevent interruption. Do you mean to tell me that they got here before you, that they've searched the house?"

"I don't know who 'they' are," I said. "But somebody has—and if it isn't your own men I'd like to know who it is."

For the first time, he glanced about him nervously.

"I can't tell you here," he said, lowering his voice. "I simply can't say anything more here. You must let me come inside."

"'Must?' Mr. Kesteven?" I asked.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, "you don't seem to have the faintest idea of the risk you're running. Believe me, your life—and Miss Lorimer's life, and the lives of anyone else you have with you, aren't worth *that*—" he snapped his fingers suddenly, exciting Menelaus to a low growl. "I'll try and help you, save you—but you must let me inside. For everyone's sake, let me come in and tell you what all this means. You'll understand, then, and perhaps you'll be sensible."

I thought about this. On reflection, I saw no particular risk about having the fellow inside the house, and he might give away useful information; we might even hold him as a hostage.

"All right," I said. "Come along."

I went to him and took him by the arm.

My action seemed to satisfy the dogs, for they allowed him to pass, but they crowded round us as we moved, and surged in through the door as we entered.

XXVI

BRENDA and Rattigan met us in the hall as we entered. As soon as I had closed the door behind me Rattigan ran up three or four of the stairs and lighted the lamp. Then he looked at Kesteven, with an expression very similar to that the Alsations were wearing. In the case of the dogs it indicated that upon receipt of a nod from me they would have great pleasure in tearing the intruder into quite small pieces; Rattigan's emotions were only a shade or two milder.

"Is it an old college chum, now, or a flag of truce?" he jerked out.

"Not exactly either," I said. I introduced Mr. Kesteven and explained that he had called for the papers.

"Those papers," Brenda said sharply, "were my father's."

Kesteven scrutinised her with his ferrety eyes.

"I beg your pardon; they are the property of a very distinguished personage: they were merely entrusted to your father——"

"And the trust cost him his life, because he would not let down the man who trusted him. Neither will we."

Kesteven made a little gesture of impatience.

"My dear young lady," he said testily, "you don't in the least understand what you're meddling with, and we're talking at cross-purposes. If you'd give me a chance to explain——"

He looked pointedly at the study door. I invited him in. Aunt Hattie was sitting before the fire, reading *Mr. Jorrocks*. She looked up, eyeing our visitor narrowly.

"This the police?" she asked.

"No," I said. "It's——"

"Then it ought to be," she said tersely, and returned to her book.

Brenda sat down opposite her. I invited Kesteven to be seated, and perched myself on the slippery end of a horsehair sofa. Rattigan leaned against the door, his eyes watchful.

"Now, Mr. Kesteven," I invited.

He leaned back in his chair and put his finger-tips together. His ferrety eyes seemed to be watching all of us simultaneously, and at the same time exploring the little room.

"I've already told you," he said, "that it is of the utmost importance that I should recover those papers without their being seen by anybody; you know that I'm doing my best to secure them—but you're quite mistaken, Captain Carmichael, in suspecting me of taking certain drastic measures——"

"I don't suspect you personally," I said scornfully, "but it's easy to hire roughnecks to do the dirty work——"

"No agents of mine," he answered earnestly,

"have anything to do with the deaths of your friends, or with any of the inconveniences you have suffered."

"Then who in thunder did them?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I can't say positively," he answered warily. "But I've every reason to believe that the people you're dealing with are some of the most unscrupulous rogues in England—and the cleverest."

"Look here," I said, "it's no good beating about the bush like this. If you expect us to believe you, you'll have to put your cards on the table."

He made a little gesture of irritation.

"I tell you I don't *know*," he insisted. "I'm only drawing conclusions. But whoever these people may be, they're determined to get those papers; they'll stick at nothing to get them. Your lives aren't worth"—again he snapped his fingers—"that. And if you, and I, are right in our deductions, they're clever enough to murder so ingeniously that in every case a coroner's jury will bring in a verdict of 'misadventure' or 'natural causes.'"

He looked round the room, and along the skirting board of the north wall.

"I gather," he said, "that you haven't found the papers yet."

"I decline to answer that question," I said stiffly.

His lips twitched in an ironic smile.

"You've answered it," he said. "If I thought you had them, I'd try to strike a

bargain with you. Since you haven't—I've only one thing to say: get out of here while you can, for if once you lay hands on those papers, none of you'll ever leave the house alive. They're only waiting for you to find the things; once they know you've got them, they'll swoop and strike. Go while you're safe."

"And leave you, I suppose, to carry on the search?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Those papers," Brenda said icily, "were entrusted to my father with some reason; until we know what that reason was, and what he would have done with them if he had"—she gulped—"lived, we won't give them up to anyone."

Still keeping his finger-tips joined, he rubbed his thumbs slowly together.

"I very much wish," he said slowly, "that I could tell you the whole story, but I dare not. I must even say less than I might, in case I might say a word more than I ought. One thing I do want to impress upon you—these documents can be of no possible use or benefit to any of you; their possession will only expose you to a terrible risk, with no chance of any reward of any kind to make it worth while. Your father, Miss Lorimer, very unwisely allowed himself to be persuaded to take charge of them—oh, I understand his motive, and honour him for it—and—well, you know the result. You none of you realise it, but you're simply meddling with something you know nothing about, and the only sane thing to do is to"—he spread out his

well-kept hands—"drop it while you're safe."

Brenda made a little gesture.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Mr. Kesteven. If these papers are, as you say, of—national importance, and these people who are trying to get them are—are murderers, why haven't you called in the police?"

"Only sensible thing," Aunt Hattie interjected. "What are they for?"

Kesteven revolved his thumbs slowly.

"There are," he said, "very excellent reasons why the police should not be brought in. Surely you understand? These papers are highly confidential, and if some stupid policeman set eyes on them——"

"But surely the Government——"

"I can't explain," he said, "but there are reasons——"

I got to my feet.

"Mr. Kesteven," I said, "your explanation is quite insufficient, and totally unsatisfactory. We're not to be scared into going away from here and leaving you a clear field; you surely can't expect us to be hoodwinked by your feeble arguments. We're going to do our best to find those papers and deal with them as we think best, and if you try to interfere with us—well, whatever happens to you will be your own funeral."

He shook his head sadly.

"My dear young man, I'm very much afraid it is going to be yours. How you can expect to find the papers, without even the very slightest clue——" He paused, and his little eyes flickered curiously.

Luckily I saw the trap.

"With our combined intelligence," I said, "we hope to stand as much chance as you would—or our friends outside—in these very difficult circumstances." I nodded at Rattigan, and he opened the door of the room.

Kesteven did not move.

"It's quite a fine night for a walk," I suggested. "Ratty, did the gentleman have a hat?"

Kesteven rose slowly to his feet.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, "you would be much wiser to go, and let me stay. But of course, if you insist upon turning me out into the night——" He paused and turned appealingly to Brenda.

She looked at him, and then at me, and I saw the corner of one eyelid droop ever so slightly.

"Mr. Kesteven," she said sweetly—the minx—"We couldn't possibly think of turning you out at this time of night, especially into the dangers that you say are lurking about outside. You must stay the night. We can put you up quite easily." She made a little deprecating gesture. "Really, we've been unpardonably rude, but you'll admit that—well, we had a certain amount of reason to suspect you. But now—I don't suppose you've had dinner?"

"Thank you, I dined at Redruth."

"At any rate, you'd like a drink. Uncle Jack, will you see what you can find? And I'll get a room ready for Mr. Kesteven."

I took the cue and went out to the dining-

room for decanter and syphon and glasses. Rattigan followed me into the hall, closing the door behind him.

"I say, skipper," he said in a hoarse whisper, "what's the big idea, now?"

"I'm not quite clear about it myself," I said, "but Miss Lorimer's got some notion in her mind, and I should guess it's to give Kesteven rope, give him a chance to do a bit of searching—and keep an eye on him while he does it. If he should have the other half of the message Lorimer wrote——"

Rattigan's eyes were as round as marbles.

"What a girl, now!" he said. "Skipper, she's more grey matter in her little finger than we have in both our brain-boxes put together."

XXVII

KESTEVEN drank a pretty stiff whisky peg with evident satisfaction, and then said he was sure we should not mind if he went to bed. He was right. I saw him to his room—the unoccupied front one—with no regrets, apologised for being unable to lend him any night gear, and leaving him with the candle went quickly downstairs and into the study.

I found the others gathered round the fire. Brenda was saying emphatically:

"I don't like that man, I wouldn't trust him—oh, not an inch."

"I agree with you," I said. "But what's the exact notion in asking him to stay the night, Kitten? I think I understand pretty well, but——"

"What do you think he'll do with himself in the dark hours?" she challenged.

"I should guess," I answered, "that if he feels sure we're safely asleep he'll prowls round and have a shot at hunting for the papers."

She nodded vigorously, her clear blue eyes sparkling.

"Exactly. And I propose we let him. If he should happen to have the other half of the clue——"

I shook my head.

"If he has," I told her, "you may be pretty certain that he hasn't it with him. Unless I mistake the man badly, he'll either have locked the message up in a safe place, or he'll have done with it exactly what we did with ours. But if we can manage to watch him without his seeing us, he might give away something useful."

"Exactly. Don't you think it's a bright idea? If you'll do the watching, Uncle Jack—Terry's too big, I think."

Rattigan nodded gloomily.

"You're right, now. But I'll sit in my room with the door ajar and my ears cocked, and if anything in the nature of a row starts—why, Rattigan will be there."

"There's just one thing," I said, "or, rather, five. If Kesteven puts his big toe outside his bedroom door after we've gone to bed, Menelaus & Co. will paralyse his

activities until they get emphatic orders to the contrary."

Brenda was plainly a little dashed.

"We'll have to put them outside," I said firmly. "It will be better, in many ways. If the fellows who are besieging us start prowling round, we'll get due notice of their arrival."

Brenda looked a shade anxiously at Miss Winterton.

"If you don't mind, Aunt Hattie——"

"Why should I mind?" Aunt Hattie demanded crisply. "It won't do the boys any harm, and if anyone should come into the garden—well, they'll go out again mighty quick." She sniffed in distaste. "I don't like people snooping round the place, it's disgusting."

"Then that's settled," I said, with a good deal of relief. "Well, I think we'd better go to bed early, so as to give Mr. Kesteven all the time he needs. I'll keep an eye on his door, and the instant he leaves his room, I'll sleuth him."

We proceeded to march about the ground floor of the house, making a noisy business of locking and bolting and barring doors and windows. Our canine bodyguard accompanied us until we reached the front door, when, on my opening it, Aunt Hattie invited her "boys" to go out and explore. They surged out eagerly, heads up and plumes waving, and I locked and barred the door after them.

We climbed the stairs to the landing, said "good-night" and "sleep well" to each

other, and went noisily to our respective rooms. I heard the key turn in the lock of Aunt Hattie's room, followed a moment later by Brenda's. Rattigan and I were sharing one of the front rooms, and after taking off our boots and making all the noises appropriate to two clumsy men going to bed, we sat down in silence to listen for Kesteven to emerge from his room. Terry lay on the bed, while I sat on a chair by the door, alert to catch the faintest sound and to slip out on to the landing instantly.

I can think of few occasions in my life when the time has passed as slowly as it did on that occasion. I could hear the deep, stately ticking of the grandfather clock down in the hall, and I spent the last thirty minutes of each hour convinced that the clock must have stopped and that it must be nearly dawn, until the chime rang another hour. I dare not speak to Terry, I could not smoke; I could do nothing but sit and breathe.

Occasionally I could hear faintly, from outside, pattering sounds as the hounds wandered round the garden. But no sound, no sign of movement, came from Kesteven's room. I began to wonder if, scenting that we regarded him less as an intruder than as a captive, he had managed to slip away. At last I crept along the landing to his door, and listened intently. From within I could hear the sound of slow, deep, regular breathing—the breathing of a man asleep. A certain hostile respect that I had for Mr. Kesteven waned; whatever object led him to penetrate

into the house, he had forgotten all about it, and was sleeping away the precious hours like a log.

I went back to my room a little uncertainly, I could do with a little sleep myself, but I dare not risk it, lest Kesteven should awake; lest he should only be shamming sleep to put us off our guard.

And then a new sound from outside caught my ear, the rumbling beginning of a low growl. It deepened, intensified, grew louder. I attracted Rattigan's attention with a low hiss, and then, clutching my automatic, moved out on to the landing and began silently to descend the stairs. I had not taken two steps downward into the darkness before the whole pack burst into full cry—an outburst of loud, savage barks that all but drowned the scurrying of their feet.

I switched on my torch and jumped the rest of the stairs into the hall. It took me a few moments to pull back the heavy, rusty bolts, and unlock the door, and by that time Rattigan had come bounding down the stairs to my side.

"We'd better not both go, skipper," he said. "Let me."

"No, I will this time," I said. "You hold the fort, Ratty, and keep your eye on Kesteven. I'm afraid this alarm has spoilt our stunt, though."

By the time I had the door open the dogs had stopped barking. I could hear no sound of them at all. I ran out into the garden; there was no sound or sign of them. I stood

for a moment, feeling maddeningly helpless, not knowing which way to go, and then, from the fields on the other side of the road, I heard one low note, scarcely a bark, but more like the belling of a bloodhound that has picked up a scent.

In my stockinged feet I raced down the path, vaulted the gate into the road, clambered over the wall on the other side, dislodging a number of slate-flakes, and went across the field as fast as I could travel over the rough, tussocky grass. Another wall bounded my vision ahead. I reached it, scaled it, and a low, grassy rise loomed black against the skyline. And as I began to move towards it, five shapes suddenly streaked along the crest, silhouetted against the sky, magnified enormously, as objects in such a position always are; great, black, shaggy forms, galloping fast, with noses low to the ground and plumes waving excitedly—Menelaus, Ajax, Hector, Achilles, and Paris.

I called and whistled, but they showed no signs of hearing; they were running on too hot a scent, I think, to heed any distractions. As I breasted the rise, a little breathless now, they reached another wall, and I watched them leap up on to the top of it in turn, poise for a moment, and then jump down out of my view. One—two—three—four—five, and they were gone.

Panting, I reached the wall and climbed over. I was on high ground now; around me the undulating fields, criss-crossed by the

stone walls, stretched, vague in the starlight. Nowhere upon them could I see the pack of Alsatians. Away to the southward rose a ragged mound, and beside it a sort of skeleton framework with a wheel on top—the derelict winding gear of an abandoned tin mine. I stood looking about me, and became conscious that it was very cold up there; there was a keen nip in the wind, and I was heated by my uphill run. An uncontrollable shiver shook me; a shiver that was uncomfortably familiar. If I were not in for a bout of malaria very shortly, I was a Dutchman.

I listened, straining my ears, but could hear no sound of the dogs, nothing but the slight whistle of the keen wind, and the soft rumble of the seas breaking along the distant shore. I had not the faintest idea in which direction to look for the pack, but I began, rather hopelessly, to quarter the ground, calling and whistling.

Suddenly I heard a noise, a faint, distant yelp that seemed to rise and fall, and then die away into silence; it sounded almost muffled. As I stood, it came from somewhere near the tin mine. I had no more definite idea of its direction than that, and it sounded very far away. Feeling less and less hopeful, I went toward it, searching and whistling and finding nothing.

At last I was obliged, reluctantly, to give up. I turned, and picking my direction by the stars, went back to Trewerry House.

As I climbed the wall into the last field before the road I heard a shrill whistle and

saw two dark forms moving on the grass. I whipped my automatic out of my pocket and advanced cautiously, but as I came near I realised that the figures wore skirts. A few paces more, and I recognised Brenda and Aunt Hattie. I hailed them, and they came towards me.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "You ought not to be out, like this; goodness knows who's about."

"I've come to look for my boys," Aunt Hattie said tersely. "And I'm perfectly safe. Brenda would come with me, but it's nonsense. Nobody's going to attack me—and they'll be mighty sorry if they try."

She lifted a hefty ashplant she carried and shook it threateningly.

"Where's Ratty?" I asked.

"In the house," Brenda said, with a little gurgle of enjoyment, "keeping an eye on your legal friend. But he lent me his pistol." She waved Rattigan's automatic about dangerously.

"Seen anything of the boys?" Aunt Hattie demanded.

"I saw them," I admitted, "away over there, but I couldn't catch them up, and they wouldn't come to my whistle."

"Of course not. Where did they go?"

"I really can't say. I lost sight of them, and I've only the vaguest idea of the direction they went in. They'll be a long way away by now. Believe me, Miss Winterton, it's perfectly useless to look for them now, in the dark. Come back to the house, and we'll

make up a search-party in the morning—if they haven't come back by then."

"Certainly not," said Aunt Hattie firmly. "I'm going to find them. You needn't come with me, either of you. I shall be all right alone."

This, of course, was unthinkable, and I said so. Then I discovered that Aunt Hattie—confound her!—had a will that harmonised with her appearance. We stood in the field arguing for twenty minutes before Brenda and I managed to persuade her to postpone her search for the dogs, and come back to the house. At last she consented, very unwillingly, and we made for the road.

"I wonder," said Brenda as we went, "what drew the dogs away?"

"Somebody snooping round the place," Aunt Hattie declared. "Disgusting. The boys chased him off, of course, and they'll go on chasing him till further orders. I'll be sorry for him if they catch him. But it'll serve him right. Disgusting!"

As we climbed the wall into the road I saw that the front door of the house was open. Golden light streamed out from the hall lamp, and silhouetted against it, almost filling the door frame, was the huge figure of Rattigan. He stood in an attitude of peering and listening, and even at that distance I could see that his red hair was on end.

"Halloo!" I hailed.

"Hullo! Is that you, skipper? I say, have you seen anything of Kesteven, now?"

"Kesteven? No. Why? Where is he?"

"I'm dashed if I know. I'm sorry to say, skipper, I've lost the little cuss. How he got out without my seeing or hearing him I don't know, but when I went to see if he was wanting to be tucked up, his bed was empty, and he's nowhere in the house at all."

XXVIII

THERE seemed nothing to be done. That was the exasperating, maddening part of the whole business, that there never seemed anything that we could do to come to grips with our extraordinarily elusive opponents. They, whoever they might be, were somewhere close around us; we had unmistakable, undeniable evidence of their presence and their hostility, but we could not get into touch with them. We had not seen one of them down here, except Kesteven—and he insisted that he was nothing to do with them—and though we had had him in our hands, we had not been able to do anything with him.

"Now you two girls get off back to bed," said Rattigan—a jest that seemed to tickle Aunt Hattie tremendously. When she and Brenda had gone upstairs, he turned to me with a trace of anxiety in his voice.

"What do you think about this business of the dogs, skipper?" he asked.

"I think they've been enticed away," I

said. "And I don't like the look of it, Ratty. We've lost our best sentries. And it looks to me as if the balloon will go up very shortly. The enemy wouldn't get the dogs away unless he contemplated attacking pretty soon, it's odds against his being able to keep the animals away for any length of time."

He nodded.

"I think you're right. Well, I don't see when we're going to get any sleep, but sure we'd both best be on the jolly alert for what's left of to-night."

"Now that the dogs have gone," I said, "I don't feel satisfied with just sitting in the house, waiting. Let's go out and patrol the garden. Just wait while I put my boots on; my socks are in ribbons."

We went, carefully locking the front door behind us, and made an exhaustive search in the darkness of the little garden. Of course, we found nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing, but all the time we felt that somewhere on the other side of those slate walls our opponents were listening and watching and waiting, choosing their own time to strike.

It was cold and monotonous work, mooching about that garden, and my shivery-shakes were becoming more obtrusive. I became impatient for action. I looked at the shed that was poor Cecil's laboratory, and Brenda's garage.

"While we're here, Ratty," I said, "let's have a look round this place. You may be right about Lorimer using it as a hidey hole."

We went into the laboratory first and

explored it by the light of my torch. It was furnished with a long bench like a joiner's bench, a number of cupboards and cabinets, and row upon row of shelves littered with bottles, retorts, and all kinds of scientific paraphernalia of which I knew nothing whatever. They were in a most unholy muddle, bottles upset and their contents spilt, retorts smashed. I inferred that our conscientious friends had included the laboratory in their search. I could not conceive Cecil Lorimer as having left a thing out of place.

"North side," said Rattigan.

The shed was built of slate, and the insides of the walls were bare. We went to the north end, and stooping to avoid a projecting shelf at about the level of my chin, and of Rattigan's chest, we examined the wall with the meticulous care that had become our habit. We scrutinised it from the shelf to ground level, but found no trace that the mortar between the slate slabs had anywhere been disturbed.

"Nothing there," said Rattigan, and rose abruptly to his full height. His head bumped loudly against the shelf, and knocked a large bottle off. It fell and smashed in a bucket that stood on the floor below. Instinctively I glanced into the bucket but saw nothing but some lumps of something faintly resembling the sweetmeat called "fudge." The bottle had apparently contained some colourless, water-like liquid.

We turned away from it, and I began to flash the torch along the wall above the shelf.

I could see no signs of it having been tampered with.

"No go, Ratty," I said, "nothing here."

And then, quite suddenly, I felt extraordinarily queer, my head swam, my eyes watered so that I was blinded, there was a choking sensation in my throat. Without a word I turned and bolted precipitately out through the door, where I stood, drinking in great gulps of clean fresh air.

Rattigan was beside me in an instant.

"What's the matter, skipper?" he asked, alarm and solicitude in his voice.

"I don't know," I gasped, finding my breath, "but there's gas or something in there. Didn't you feel it, Ratty?"

He scratched his red head.

"Now you mention it, there was a queer smell—a kind of sickly smell—and my eyes watered. But I'd not say I *felt* anything. Maybe 'tis because my head's higher up than yours, skipper, or I'm tougher. But I can't make it out. Who can be here, now, to be putting gas about?"

"It was a booby trap," I said wrathfully. "That bottle you knocked off the shelf, Ratty—it was pretty ingeniously set. They reckoned we shouldn't upset it until *after* we'd examined the place, and if we'd found anything, they reckoned we shouldn't get out of the shed alive. They only had to come in and collect the papers off our corpses. Nice little lads, our friends. I'll have the contents of that bucket analysed as soon as I get a chance."

Rattigan was not listening.

"Then they're hanging about pretty close, the swine," he said. "Come on, skipper, and we'll get 'em yet."

He made for the wall at a run, I at his heels. As we ran, we heard a scuffling, scampering sound on the other side. We vaulted the wall cleanly, and then stopped to look round us, but we could hear no further movement, see no sign of a living soul. I dropped flat on the ground to make a skyline before me, against which any figure would show up clearly, but I could see nothing.

We had to give it up. Pursuit in the starlight could only be aimless, and, acutely conscious of the unprotected state of our embarrassing womenfolk, we dare not go too far from the house. Seething with futile wrath, we returned to the garden and continued our wearying patrol.

Very much on the alert, we entered the garage and inspected its walls thoroughly. Here there was no booby-trap, nor anything else but Brenda's crippled little car.

XXIX

AT the first peep of dawn Brenda called us in and presented us with large cups of steaming coffee. We drank it gratefully, for we were very cold. Brenda noticed my shaking hands and shook her head at me reproachfully.

"Uncle Jack, you're shivering," she said.

"You ought not to have stayed outside in the cold all night."

"A touch of malaria, that's all," I assured her. "It always gives one the shivery-shakes, you know."

"Then you ought to be in bed," she said sharply. "You've no right to be up at all, still less hanging about outside in the dead of night. I ought to have remembered that after being in the tropics so long you can't stand this climate. It was stupid of me——"

"Nonsense," I told her, "I'm as fit as a flea. And there's nothing else to do, anyway. We've got to keep a guard at night and by day we've got to hunt for those papers, as hard as we can go—and then get out of here." I looked at her closely. "Kitten, my dear, I hate to say it, but our job would be easier if you and Miss Winterton were to go into Redruth, say, and put up at a hotel. Ratty and I would feel—well, that we had more of a free hand——"

Her eyes snapped.

"Oh, if I'm an encumbrance——" she began, *con spirito*. Then she checked herself and added more gently: "I really couldn't leave you two men to look after yourselves. Goodness knows what mischief you'd get into. Besides, this is first and foremost my affair; you've been awfully decent, both of you, in coming in to help me, and I couldn't leave you to the risky part of it; I'm going to see it through. Also besides, there's Aunt Hattie; if you think she'll leave here until she's found her lost dogs, you don't know her. And I couldn't go away and leave her unchaperoned."

It was true that Miss Winterton would certainly refuse to leave Trewherry House until her animals returned ; it was also true, on reflection, that I should not feel that Brenda was safe anywhere except close under my own eye.

"Oh well," I conceded, "let's hope we'll soon find the papers, and be able to get away all together. I vote we start hunting for them again right away."

We did. With the same scrupulous care as we had exercised previously, we examined the outside of the north wall of the house. We broke off for breakfast, at which meal Aunt Hattie appeared, looking sterner than ever.

"My boys have not come back," she said, looking at me accusingly. "You promised we should get up a search party——"

"Do you mind waiting a bit ? " I suggested. "We want to finish our hunt for the papers, we ought to get it done by lunch time."

"And suppose you don't find them ? " Aunt Hattie demanded.

"We've got to find them," I said firmly. "We can't go until we do."

Aunt Hattie sniffed.

"My," she observed, apparently at a tangent, "I'd just hate to have to stay in this hole for the rest of my life."

"Don't you worry," Rattigan said cheerfully, "we'll soon find them now ; there's not many more places where they can be."

XXX

AFTER breakfast we resumed our inspection of the wall, but found nowhere any faintest trace of a hiding place. The outer wall of the shed was equally destitute of any sign of disturbance. Not very hopefully—for the loose flakes of slate did not suggest a secure "cache"—Rattigan and I examined the garden wall. All the time we were conscious that eyes might be watching us, watching with an eager, inimical interest, but though we looked round suddenly at intervals, we saw no sign of any watcher.

It was as we were returning to the house that I noticed, for the first time, half concealed among the hummocky grass in an angle of the wall, a horizontal circle of stonework on the ground.

"Hello," I said, "what's that?"

Together Rattigan and I went over and inspected the object.

"It looks to me, now, like a well," Rattigan said. "An old, disused one, since we get our water from the standpipe in the road there."

"A well," I said. "By thunder, why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't I notice the thing itself? We didn't go over this place properly to start with, Ratty."

"Eh?" he said. "D'you think——"

"I do," I said. "I don't know why in thunder it didn't occur to me before; it comes of being blinded by a preconceived idea. We

only thought that Lorimer wrote 'have hidden —', something, presumably the papers, '—well' or 'in a wall.' But suppose the word was 'well' all the time, and what he really wrote was 'have hidden the papers *in* the well?' That would explain 'north side' and 'so many feet down'."

"By Jove, it would," he agreed. "Come on, let's explore it."

We looked down at the ring of slate stones, and the deep circular pit they enclosed. It was impossible to see far into the depths of the well, but such of the walls as were visible were green with moss and slime.

"I'll have to go down," I said. "We want a rope, Ratty: the winding gear, such as it may have been, has all gone."

"I'll get it," said Rattigan. "You stay here, skipper, and see that no bad lads run away with the well and all."

I stood there, endeavouring to give an impression to any possible watcher that I was looking down into the well, while in reality my gaze was sweeping the walls—the east one that ran from close at hand to the end of the garden, and the north one there. Once, out of the tail of my eye, I thought I saw a sudden movement above the wall at the west of the garden, but by the time I had swung my full gaze round to the spot, there was nothing unusual, nothing capable of movement, to be seen.

Rattigan came back with a good-sized beam and a big coil of heavy rope, that he had found in the garage. "Some gear of Lorimer's,

I'd say," he speculated. "You said he was making some experiments to do with tin mines, didn't you? He'd perhaps go down a mine shaft now and again to have a look-see."

He put the beam across the mouth of the well, leaving room for the passage of my body, and wedged it as well as was possible with stones.

"There's nothing in the shape of winding gear," he said. "I'll just have to take all the weight myself, skipper. Come here, now, and let me tie the end of the rope round your slender waist."

I went close to him.

"Keep your eyes skinned," I warned him. "I won't swear we're being watched, but I'm pretty certain I saw a movement above the wall at the side there. Better make the rope fast to the beam, Ratty, and I'll go down hand over hand."

He demurred.

"I don't like it. If you were to let go——"

"I jolly well won't. If you're lowering me, Ratty, it'll take both your hands, and you may want one of them free. We'll do as I say."

We lowered the rope down the well, listening intently. Presently we heard a faint, dull splash as the end struck water.

"That'll do," I said. "Take a turn or two round the beam, Ratty, and hitch it fast, then you can hold the other end, just to be on the safe side."

He obeyed, and I stooped down, grasping the rope. Then I swung myself over the lip

of the well and dropped to the full extent of my arms, hanging by my hands from the rope. For a few moments I spun round dizzyingly, but managed to brake with my feet against the slimy sides of the shaft. Hanging by my left hand, I dived for the torch with my right, and by the light of its white beam scanned the wall. It was smooth and slimy, there was no sign upon its surface of any recent disturbance. Returning the torch to my pocket, I lowered myself another six feet, and tried again. Still nothing. I went lower, and lower still, without result, and all around me was damp and icy cold, and as dark and silent as any tomb could ever be.

Quite suddenly my feet splashed in water. Without realising it, I had come as far as I very well could. I had no idea of the depth of the water that lay below me, it might be only a few inches, it might be fathoms. I flashed my light down on a dark, oily surface, covered with scum and water weed. It was impossible to gauge, thus, the depth, but as the ray of white light travelled to and fro it flashed on something that drove all other thoughts out of my mind, something long and rectangular and white, an envelope.

For an instant I stared. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Had Cecil, after all, merely thrown the papers down the well? Or had he lodged them precariously in some crevice in the stonework, whence they had fallen to the bottom? At any rate, there, apparently, they were, and I would lose no time in getting them.

I don't know if you've ever tried to hang from a swinging rope and pick up an object floating on water below you, level with your feet. I can assure you that it is a great deal more difficult than you might think. I endeavoured to curl myself round the rope as I worked my hands downward, and to a certain extent I succeeded, but when I stretched out a hand to clutch at the envelope, I overbalanced and nearly went head first into the foul water. My recovery sent me spinning round until I could stretch out a foot to check myself against the wall, and the splash I made sent the envelope bobbing out of my reach, away toward the opposite side of the shaft. Stretch out my hand as I might, I could not grasp it without letting go the rope.

At last I realised that there was only one thing to do. I lowered my legs and body into the water until it was breast-high—I could feel no bottom with my feet—and again reached out for the elusively floating envelope. My fingers closed upon it, clutched it, and I drew it to me and thrust it into my pocket.

Hand over hand I began to climb up again. Above me I could see a disc of blue sky, with the black bulk of the beam flung across it, and Rattigan's bullet head silhouetted at one side. I make no claim to being anything of a rope-climber, but I went up out of that shaft pretty quickly; it was a good place to get out of.

Rapidly the disc of blue grew clearer and larger, Rattigan's face became more distinct; I could see the bristle of his red hair, the

excitement in his bright, twinkling blue eyes.

"Got anything, skipper?" he asked in a hoarse whisper that could have been heard half a mile away.

"I think so," I answered, a little pantingly, for my efforts had winded me a little, "an envelope, anyway——"

"Oh, good goods! Glory be!" he exclaimed. I saw his great hands come forward and grasp the rope, hauling me up. A few moments later I flung myself across the beam, worked my way to the side, and scrambled back to the grass.

"Where is it?" Rattigan demanded excitedly
"Let's have a look."

"In here," I said, pulling it half out of my pocket. "I——"

The next instant something hit me on the back of the head and I pitched forward helplessly. It was a miracle that I did not go hurtling back down the well shaft; only the beam saved me. I clung to that with both arms, sick and dizzy with the force of the blow on my skull, and lay poised over the dark depths. I felt a hand plunged into my pocket, but for the moment I was too dazed to resist. The hand withdrew. I flung myself back and round, jumped to my feet. There was no one in sight but Rattigan, prone on his face in the grass.

My first thought was of him. I bent over him, and turned him over. His fist shot out and caught me in the stomach with an impact that knocked the wind out of me. I was still

gasping when he, in turn, got to his feet and stood, rocking a little, staring down at me in stupefaction.

"What's happened?" he challenged. "Something hit me on the back of the head, something like the pointed end of a ton of coals, and I went down like a felled ox. Did they do the same to you?"

"They did," I assured him, "only not quite so much so. And they've got the papers, whatever they are. But we may catch 'em yet. Come on!"

I was still too shaky to vault the wall, but I clambered up on to it, sat astride it, and scanned the field beyond. There was no sign of a living soul. Our opponents were quick movers; after bowling us over from behind so neatly and silently, they must have jumped back over the wall, and simply hared along under the lee of it, over the wall that bounded the road, and so away out of sight. We presumed they went that way, and not the other, because they would be out of sight so much more quickly.

Not very hopefully, Rattigan and I ran down to the road and looked up and down it, and over the wall on the opposite side into the field beyond, but both were empty.

"'Tis no go, now," said Rattigan. "We're done, skipper, sold."

A patter of flying feet behind us brought us quickly round. Brenda, her eyes wide with anxiety, yet dancing with excitement, was tearing down the garden path towards us.

"Are you hurt, either of you?" she asked anxiously. Then, as we shook our heads, she

added: "There's no sign of them, of course; they moved like lightning."

I stared at her.

"What?" I shouted. "Did you see them?"

"Oh, yes. Out of the bedroom window. I'd have called to warn you, but there wasn't time. They were over the wall and back again so quickly. They're in good training, whoever they are."

"Could you see what they were like?" I demanded.

She shook her head doubtfully.

"Not really. I saw that one was a big, powerful creature, and the other was very small and nippy. But I couldn't make out their faces; I don't think I could recognise them again. They were curiously pink faces, pink and set-looking, expressionless."

"Masks," I said. "Guy Fawkes' masks. We haven't a hope of identifying 'em. Brenda, my dear, they've been too clever for us, after all."

I saw the excitement die out of her eyes; a look almost of horror take its place. I heard the quick intake of her breath. For several moments she was silent, then:

"Just exactly what do you mean, Uncle Jack?" she asked.

"I mean, my dear," I said, "that unless I'm very much mistaken they've got the papers."

"Oh, Uncle Jack!"

"I'm sorry, Kitten. I'm more sorry than I can say. But——"

"Oh, I know. I'm not blaming you. You hadn't a chance. They were so quick. Why,

even I, at the window, didn't see them until they jumped over the wall, and, as I say, they'd bowled both of you over and were gone again before I could open the window to shout. It can't be helped, but——" She dropped her hands in a little gesture of dejection. "I hate to be beaten—and I'm sure poor daddy wouldn't have liked them to get those papers; I'm sure they're the very men he was trying to keep from getting them. Still, it can't be helped now."

"If only I'd kept a proper watch, and not had my back turned," Rattigan lamented in doleful contrition.

In silence the three of us turned and walked through the little gate and back up the path to the house.

"They were in the well, then, the papers? So that's what 'well' meant, and 'north side' and 'so many feet down'?"

I nodded.

"Yes, in an envelope, floating in the water at the bottom. I had quite a job to get them."

"You must have. Why, Uncle Jack, you're soaking, and with your malaria, too. You must come in and get dried."

"And then?" Rattigan asked. "Is there anything else we can do?"

I shook my head.

"I'm afraid there isn't," I said. "We must just give up the whole business and go back to town—unless—by Jove, Ratty, it's ten to one they'll make for a railway station. They'll have to go to somewhere to make use of those things; they can't do anything with them down

here. Can we beat them to Redruth, do you think ? ”

He frowned heavily in process of thought. “ ’Tis more likely they’d make for another station.”

“ There’s not another before Truro that the fast trains stop at. I don’t think they’d expect us to chase ’em. At any rate, we can’t do more than try. Let’s make for Redruth. Unless——.” I checked. “ Of course, they might have a car somewhere, but somehow or other I don’t think so. I believe if we could race ’em to the railway we’d collar them yet.”

We stopped and looked at each other ; there still seemed a ray of hope.

“ We can’t all go,” said Rattigan. “ We’d never make the pace.” (He was thinking, I knew, of Aunt Hattie.) “ And even if they’ve the papers, and have no further interest in us, I don’t like leaving the ladies behind here.” (He was thinking of Brenda, then.) “ You’d best let me go, skipper, I’m the biggest.”

We talked it over, briefly, for obviously there was no time to waste. Rattigan’s idea seemed a sound one. He was very much the man for the job ; nobody had any better suggestion to offer.

“ But for goodness’ sake take care, Ratty,” I said. “ We don’t know what we’re up against. There may be a dozen of them, for all we can tell. Don’t go barging in.”

“ Not I, skipper,” he said. “ I’ll not start anything unless it seems the only way of stopping them, and then I’ll provoke the kind of row that we’ll all get run in for ; that’ll

hold 'em up till you arrive. It's a pretty forlorn hope, but I hate to give up."

"Good for you," I said. "We'll come along as fast as we can, and look for you at Redruth station. We'll find you all right."

"If I get a chance," he answered, "I'll send a car to meet you." He nodded cheerfully, patted the revolver in his pocket, and vaulting the gate set off up the road at a run.

I turned and looked at Brenda. She was staring after Rattigan's rapidly diminishing figure, her eyes wistful. A little shudder ran through her, then slowly she turned to me. Her little white hand caught at my sleeve; her blue eyes were misty as she raised them to mine.

"Uncle Jack, do you think he'll be—all right?"

"Oh, rather," I said. "You can trust Rattigan to look after himself; he's big enough, anyway."

She nodded slowly, dubiously.

"Yes . . . yes, I suppose so. And we . . . there's nothing we can do, Uncle Jack?"

"Nothing, Kitten, I'm afraid. And there's no object in staying here. We'd better pack up as much as we can conveniently carry, and make for Redruth."

She seemed hesitant, reluctant; she stood there twisting her fingers, looking at the house that had been, at any rate for a little while, her home, the last home that she and poor Cecil had had. Then she turned, and went into the hall.

"I'll tell Aunt Hattie," she said.

But Miss Winterton was already in the hall, and apparently she had overheard something of our conversation. Her manly hat was crammed firmly on her head, her hand clutched her ashplant, and she surveyed me with a baleful glare in her eyes.

"Young man," she said, "I don't leave this place until I've found my boys; you promised me that we'd organise a search party. . . ."

I very nearly suggested a most unlikely spot for her to go and hunt for her pack, and then it occurred to me that if we could find the hounds they might be uncommonly useful in tracking our enemies, if Terry could not pick up their trail; a reasonable amount of time spent in hunting for the dogs would not be altogether wasted if we found them in the end. And if Rattigan sent a car we could afford to spend a little time in the search. Without one, we could not hope to reach Redruth in time to do anything more effective than Rattigan could do alone.

"All right," I agreed. "Let me get dry at the kitchen fire—you might start packing in the meantime—and then we'll go and look for the hounds."

.XXXI

"I HAVEN'T the faintest idea where to look for Menelaus & Co.," I said, as we started off. "I'll take you up to the top

of the hill, where I saw them last, and we'll look round. That's the best I can do."

"I'll find them," Aunt Hattie said grimly. "They're not likely to be far away, and if anyone's hurt my boys, I'll make him sorry he was ever born."

Not very hopefully, we set off up the hill. It was a clear, bright day; the grey stone walls were defined with curious sharpness against the green of the fields; away to the northward, as we climbed, we could see the distant sea, a sheet of sunlit blue to the horizon.

We reached the crest, climbed the wall that I had seen the hounds leap over on the previous night, and presently found ourselves close to the derelict tin mine. There were big heaps of refuse, overgrown with coarse grass and moss, a scatter of chunks of slate, the remains of a wooden engine-house, some sheds, and the tall skeleton structure of the winding gear, with the wheel at the apex. All the steelwork was red with rust, the paint had blistered off long before: the place must have been abandoned for years. The central spine of Cornwall, I have learnt since, is scattered with these derelict mine workings, once profitable concerns and now mere relics of an industry under eclipse.

Aunt Hattie pointed at the engine shed.

"That's the sort of place they might have shut my boys up in," she declared, and began to march determinedly toward it. Brenda and I had to hurry to catch her up.

An idea flashed into my mind, as we advanced, that this was not at all an unlikely spot for

our opponents to choose as their headquarters. It had many points; it was a landmark visible for many miles around, and from the sea, and placed as it was upon a high ground it was an excellent observation post. It was quite on the cards that some of the enemy might be inside the shed at the moment, watching us, preparing to deal with us. Unobtrusively, I hoped, I slid my hand into the pocket where my automatic lay.

As we came closer, I doubted if the shed concealed anything of an ambush; it had a thoroughly tumble-down appearance, and there were gaps in its walls where planks were missing. All the same, I was taking no more chances than I could help. As we reached the doorway—it had no door—I drew Aunt Hattie back, and pulling out my automatic stepped quickly into the shed.

It was empty, quite empty, and held no sign whatever of recent occupation. The floor was grass-grown, and the grass was not even trampled; there was nothing lying about that anyone might have dropped, and certainly there were no dogs there.

I looked down at Aunt Hattie, who had pushed in beside me and was staring round the place. I think she had been quite convinced that somewhere in these mine workings, and probably in the shed itself, her hounds were imprisoned. The expression of almost incredulous disappointment on her weather-beaten face was pathetic; there was a look in her eyes that suggested that the Amazon was on the verge of tears.

"I say, Miss Winterton, I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid it's no go," I said. "This is as far as I was able to trace the dogs, and since they're not here—well, I simply don't know where they might be. I can't see anything that we might track them by, there are no signs—tufts of hair or anything."

"No," she said dully. "No."

She turned and went out into the open again. She called the names of the hounds again and again, from her pocket she produced a little silver whistle and blew upon it a definite call, impossible not to recognise. She went on doing this at intervals for some time, and in the pauses all three of us listened intently for a bark, a whine, for any audible evidence of a dog's presence. None came. We heard no sound at all except the whistle of the wind through the stays of the winding gear. A curious sense of desolation gripped me, such as I had never known in Africa, a feeling that somewhere just out of the radius of our range of vision the world had dropped away into oblivion and only we three were left.

I looked at Brenda. She was standing near, dangerously near, the mine shaft, peering down into its dark depths. As I took a step towards her, she turned and looked at me.

"I wonder how deep it is, Uncle Jack," she said.

I shook my head.

"I've no idea. But pretty deep, for certain, uncomfortably deep to fall down, Kitten. Look here, we'll try the old stunt. Listen."

I picked up a bit of slate, held it out over the

mouth of the shaft and dropped it. We listened for a space of time that seemed like minutes, though it could only have been seconds. At last, a faint, hollow splash came reverberating up the shaft and reached our ears.

"Pretty deep, eh?" I said.

She shuddered.

"Heaven help anyone who fell down there," she said, "he wouldn't stand an earthly chance."

She looked upward at the winding gear.

"I suppose they lowered the miners down with that, on some sort of a lift?"

"A cage, I think they call it," I told her.

"Yes, that would be the idea, I imagine."

She nodded slowly, still staring upward, and then suddenly her little hand clutched my wrist.

"Uncle Jack," she said in a quick whisper, "don't jump or make a noise or anything—there's a man, a man with a pink face, lying in the grass on the other side of the pit, watching us."

XXXII

I WAS grateful for her warning. Without it I should almost certainly have given a whoop of surprise or something. As it was, I turned my head slowly and stared across the shaft as if I were negligently admiring the scenery on the other side.

I don't know why I had failed to notice the fellow, but I imagine it was simply because I had

not looked, I had been intent upon other things ; Brenda's mind had been less occupied, and she had been staring about her. Anyhow, now that I looked, I could see clearly enough the dark, huddled figure of a man lying among the lumps of slate, could distinguish clearly the patch of pink that was his face.

"Stay where you are, Kitten," I said softly, "and talk to Aunt Hattie. I'm going round to have a look at him."

I saw alarm leap into her eyes.

"Uncle Jack, do be careful."

"That's all right. I'll keep him covered, through my pocket."

With both hands in my pockets, and whistling negligently, I strolled round the pit mouth. The man did not move. I began to flatter myself that my camouflage was being highly successful ; the fellow had no idea that we had seen him, and was emulating the hare, squatting perfectly still in the happy delusion that he would not be noticed.

But as I came close to him, so close that he could no longer hope to remain unseen, and he still did not move, a sudden uneasy and unpleasant feeling ran through me. The fellow lay as still as the dead. Had there been yet another murder ?

I went up to him then, and bent over him. He lay perfectly still upon his side, in an ominously limp and unnaturally contorted attitude, his face hidden from me. Dropping on to one knee, I put a hand upon his shoulder and quickly turned him over. There was scarcely time for me to be surprised at his lightness

before I found myself staring, not at his face, but at a pink cardboard mask fastened to a mere bundle of tied straw, crowned by a hat. The thing was a dummy.

I was completely puzzled: I knelt there, looking at this curious and inexplicable object. I felt a touch on my shoulder, and Brenda's voice said:

"Is he—— My stars, what on earth is it? Something left over from Guy Fawkes' day?"

"I don't know," I said, turning to her. "You can see what it is, but I can't make out what it could have been made for. I can't recollect any occasion when our friends might have used it—but of course they may not have used it yet; they may have something up their sleeves for us—or may have had. Now they'll have no need for it. I suppose they jettisoned the guy here, when they found they didn't want him."

Brenda stood, looking down at the thing, a little pucker between her brows.

"There's a bit of rope round its neck," she said. "I wonder what the idea could have been?"

I had not noticed the rope. I took hold of it and hauled, and a considerable length—I should think about thirty yards—came wriggling through the long grass. I did not trouble to haul it out to the end,

"They meant to dangle him from somewhere," I said. "Perhaps their scheme was to climb up on our roof at night and dangle him outside our bedroom windows, to scare us, or draw fire or something."

Brenda nodded abstractedly. She had a practical mind, and since the effigy had no longer a purpose she lost interest in it.

"Anyway," she said, turning away, "they must have robbed a scarecrow of its Sunday suit, the back of the jacket is simply in ribbons."

Looking back, I wonder if it was extraordinarily stupid of me to fail in recognising the significance of that torn jacket, and of that length of rope attached to the dummy's neck. Sometimes I acquit myself, saying that there was nothing there to guide my mind into channels in which these signs would have an obvious meaning; at other times I could still kick myself for my obtuseness.

Aunt Hattie's voice hailed us from across the shaft.

"Found anything?" she called.

"Nothing of any use," I answered. "Nothing to do with your dogs." I turned to Brenda. "We may as well be getting back. There's nothing more we can do here."

For a moment she did not answer. She was staring up at the lofty skeleton of the winding gear, with its spidery-looking wheel atop.

"Wheel," she said slowly. "Wheel. Uncle Jack, do you think—is it possible that when poor daddy wrote the word we took for w-a-l-l or w-e-l-l—it looked more like w-e-l-l, you know—could he have meant w-h-e-e-l? Could this wheel"—she spoke more quickly, eagerly—"be anything to do with it?"

I deliberated for a moment, and then shook my head.

"I doubt it, Kitten. I know poor Cecil

was a dying man, and the writing was terribly shaky, not a bit like his—but I don't think—even in the circumstances—he'd have made a mistake like that. And surely he wouldn't have ventured as far from the house as this, alone, with documents that he was guarding carefully, documents that those fellows were ready to commit murder to get hold of."

The eager light died out of her eyes.

"No," she said, "no. It doesn't seem likely, does it?"

"And would he have had a chance without your knowing?" I persisted.

"He might at night, he couldn't in the daytime; but he might easily have gone out at night. I'm a heavy sleeper."

"Would he have risked it?" I challenged again.

She threw up her chin in a little gesture that I liked.

"Daddy would have risked anything to do what he thought was right, and best."

"Anyway, you seem to have forgotten," I said, "that I fished the papers out of the well, and the other side have got away with them."

She shot me a curious, sidelong glance.

"Have they?" she asked in a low tone. "Uncle Jack, I don't feel satisfied about that. You didn't actually *see* the papers themselves, did you?"

"Why, no," I said. "It was just a soggy envelope with papers of some sort inside. But why should you think——"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I hardly know," she admitted. "It may be feminine intuition, or it may be sheer nonsense, but I somehow can't believe that the papers have been found, and stolen from us. I can't feel that our search is over, that there's nothing more we can do here. It's odd——"

"I don't know," I said. "I've got the same kind of feeling. I suppose we've been hunting so hard that it has become a kind of *idée fixe*: almost a habit. I absolutely have to keep on telling myself that it's no use searching any longer, because there's no longer anything to search for."

She nodded slowly.

"It is so, though, I'm afraid." She sighed. "Come along, let's get back—go to Redruth and find Mr. Rattigan, and see what he's been doing."

We rejoined Aunt Hattie. She looked at us stolidly, but I knew that a very deep emotion was stirring her behind her stoical mask.

"I'm afraid we can't do any good here, Miss Winterton," I said.

"I know that, young man," she answered tartly. "You two have only been wasting time the last ten minutes. We'll go to Redruth—and the first police-station we pass, I'm going in, to tell them all about my boys having been decoyed away, and offer a reward—and it's going to be a big one—for their recovery, dead or alive, or any news that will lead to the arrest of the thieves—that kind of thing."

"You shall," I told her—soothingly, I expect. She eyed me stonily.

"Young man," she said, "I'm going to."

Disappointed and dispirited, we made our way back down the hill, over the stone fences, and so to the last field before the road. And there, as we stumbled over the tussocky grass, I heard a sound that pulled me up short.

"What is it?" Brenda asked quickly.

"There's a car coming," I said; "coming down the road from Redruth."

We stood listening and watching; from where we stood we could see a small section of the road as it twined and twisted down through the undulating country. The roar of the engine grew louder rapidly, at extraordinary speed. Then through the piece of road visible to us a car shot, so quickly that if we had not been watching the spot intently we should not have seen it.

I looked at Brenda; she was staring fixedly at the spot, her lips a little open, her breath came in little gasps.

"It may not be—for us——" she said, as if trying to deny an unpleasant fact.

"It can't be for anyone else," I said. I spoke curtly to hide my own uneasiness. There was a suggestion of urgency, of precipitation, in this haste, that alarmed me. My thoughts, of course, went to Rattigan; something must have happened to him.

"By God," I said to myself, "if they've done anything to Ratty, I'll hound them down, if I have to chase them all over Europe."

I turned to Brenda.

"Come on," I said. "They'll be at the house in a minute."

I seized her hand, and leaving Aunt Hattie,

we ran, hand in hand, down the hummocky slope toward the house.

XXXIII

AFTER all, our haste was unnecessary. I had forgotten the wreck of the hay-cart blocking the road, and only remembered it as we climbed the wall. I reminded Brenda that the occupants of the car, whoever they were, would have to finish the journey on foot, and could not arrive yet; so we waited for Aunt Hattie, and the three of us walked up the road together to meet the new arrivals.

It seemed to me, in my anxious impatience, an unconscionable time before we sighted them, but eventually they rounded a bend in the road ahead and came striding rapidly towards us. One of them was Rattigan himself, rumpled and wrathful, and the other was a massive, stolid young country policeman.

"Hello, Terry!" I called. "What's happened?"

He scowled savagely.

"Hell's bells!" he growled. "It's nothing to what will happen when I get my hands on the perishers. I'll larn 'em."

He reached us even as he spoke. He looked at me, and there was an excited light in his blue eyes. He dived a hand down into the inner pocket of his jacket, brought out a damp and discoloured envelope, and handed it to me.

"Is that," he jerked out, "the thing you fished out of the well, now?"

I took the envelope from him and turned it over in my hand. I could not have sworn to it, but certainly it looked like the one I had recovered from the well and that had been taken from me by our opponents.

"Look inside," he said excitedly.

I opened the envelope and drew out the sodden papers it contained. I had little need to unfold them: one glance was enough for me, as it had evidently been for the enemy. Here were no mysterious secret papers, to capture which men had committed murder, to protect which men had died—the envelope merely contained a collection of circulars from manufacturing chemists. I supposed that Lorimer had kept them for some time, for reference, and then, deciding they were of no further use, thrown them carelessly into the old well.

I looked up at Terry in amazement.

"Then—then——" I stammered.

"Exactly," he said, grinning. "The bad lads didn't get away with the goods after all; we've not lost 'em. They've still to be found. The game's not up yet, skipper; there's another round to go, and we've still a chance of winning."

I told him that I was damned. Behind me I heard Aunt Hattie say, "Tchut! tchut!" in tones of reproof.

"Well, what have you been up to, Terry?" I asked. "Tell us all about it."

He shook his head.

"The most important thing," he said, "is

that up behind the hay-cart, I've a car for us to make our get-away in when we've found the papers. If you'll give us a hand, skipper, to move the cart out of the road, we'll tootle it down to the house."

"Oh, splendid," I said, and Brenda and he and I began to run up the road like three school-children. The constable followed us stolidly, and glancing back over my shoulder I saw that Aunt Hattie had buttonholed him and was talking to him rapidly and with emphasis—presumably about the strange and reprehensible disappearance of her dogs.

We found the hay-cart exactly as it had been on the night of our arrival. Beyond it was a big saloon car, held up by the obstruction.

I should never have imagined that to move a cartload of hay could give so much trouble to three strong men. Of course, if the wheels had still been on, we could have pushed the infernal thing along the road, but, as I have said, the whole outfit had collapsed when our car touched it, and the body of the vehicle was flat on the ground on top of the splintered wheels. The first thing was to empty out the loose hay, and as we had no hay-forks or any similar implements, the only method was to gather it up in armfuls and heave it over the wall that flanked the road. This took an unconscionable time, but after that the job was easier. The three of us lifted one side of the cart and tilted it against the bank at the side of the road. But still there was no room for the car to pass: the enemy, with a fine strategic sense, had chosen the narrowest bit

in the whole road—I should think it was the narrowest bit of road in Britain! We had to lower the heavy cart again, lift it bodily, and stagger along with it until a gate opening in the wall gave us room to dispose of it. We were panting and perspiring by the time we had parted with it: the constable took off his helmet and mopped his brow with the largest and reddest handkerchief I have ever seen. Then he produced a fat notebook and licking a stub of pencil laboriously wrote down the name and address painted in white on the side of the cart.

J. TREVITHICK,
CLISTON.

“I’ll interrogate Joe Trevithick about un,” he announced ominously, and shut up the book with a snap of satisfaction.

After that, wheels and shafts and general débris seemed to weigh nothing. We tossed them light-heartedly over the wall.

“By the way,” Rattigan said, “I haven’t introduced you yet—this is my friend Constable Carne, of the County Police.”

The constable touched his helmet and said that he was pleased to meet us. When Terry, diving into the car, produced three bottles of beer, he seemed even more pleased. Having no glasses, we drank from the necks of the bottles, and I have never tasted better beer.

“Great stuff, this,” said Terry, waving the empty bottle. “Well, shall we go along now, skipper?”

I agreed, and we all piled into the car. We seemed to be at the house in no time at all.

We ran the car into the drive, alongside the shed. There was no room for it inside. By then we felt that it was very definitely lunch time. We all sat down together in the study to cold ham and pickles and bread and cheese and beer, and between mouthfuls Terry told us what had happened to him since he left us.

XXXIV

“YOU’LL understand,” he said, “that believing that those blighters had the papers and were haring off to London or elsewhere as fast as their legs would carry them, I didn’t bother about taking any of the usual and obvious precautions; I’d no reason to expect an ambush, you understand. I just went blinding up the road as fast as I could travel. I’d have given my soul for a car.

“Well, when I got to the hay-cart, I had to slow up to get past it; as you know, there was barely room to walk by. And just as I was squeezing past the end, the darkness of Tophet dropped on me straight out of the blue. Some perisher on the top of the hay bonneted me with a sack, skipper, exactly as they did with you the night we arrived, but this time he had the nerve to do it, and do it successfully, in broad daylight. Why I didn’t see the fellow up there, I don’t know, except that he was above my natural plane of vision, and of course I was not looking for him.

“Well, of course, the first thing I did was

to throw my hands up to tear the sack off my head, and immediately my wrists were grabbed, wrenched behind my back, and very scientifically and effectively lashed with rope. I kicked out for all I was worth, and then something grabbed one of my ankles, jerked my leg up into the air, and I went flat on my back. I went down with such a crash that it knocked the wind out of me, and stunned me a bit, too, I'm thinking, because I don't remember feeling them tie my ankles together. The next sensation I had was that hands—nasty, rough, hard hands—were going through my pockets.

"I tell you, I've never felt such a fool in my life as I did lying there, trussed up like a chicken, with that damnable sack over my head, while those hogs searched me, and I never felt so near committing murder. They searched me thoroughly, too: if I'd had a threepenny bit concealed about me they'd have found it. I was raging, but I couldn't do a damned thing. I wriggled, and heaved at the ropes, but they were too well tied to give, and when I struggled a bit too hard, some hog hit me on the head with something heavy. I couldn't see a thing, of course. I didn't hear a sound—I think the blighters worked in silence, but in any case I can tell you that a sack over your head tends to deaden noises from outside: in fact I could do nothing but breathe, and that not any too well.

"At last the hands left off touching me, and I felt a stillness all around. I came to the conclusion that my friends had gone. So then I began to wriggle and heave for all I

was worth. By sliding along the ground, feet first, I managed to scrape the sack off my head, and then I felt a bit better. I looked round me, as well as I could, and there was not a soul in sight—nothing but the road and the bank with the wall atop, and the smashed wagon beside me.

“Well, then I did the stunt that the hero always did in the books we read as boys: after he’d been well and truly tied up, he found something sharp lying about, and snaked towards it, and rubbed the rope round one of his wrists against the edge of it until he cut it through. I always thought it a bit of a tall story, but, by the Tower of Cashel, I did it, with a sharp flake of slate, and without cutting my hand off. Once one hand was free, the rest was dead easy.

“Well, I got to my feet, feeling a bit sick and sorry for myself, and looked about me, but there was nothing worth looking at. If one of those perishers had been in sight, I’d have chased him all over Cornwall, and when I got him I’d have hammered the life out of him. But though I climbed up on top of the hay and had a good *dekko* round the surrounding country, there was not a human being to be seen. Stone walls may not a prison make, but when they’re running all over the shop like a jig-saw puzzle, as these do here, they provide jolly good cover for making a get-away. And anyway, my friends had had plenty of time to hook it. I don’t know how long it took me to get myself free, but it must have been every bit of an hour.

"It was after I'd climbed down to the ground again that I saw that envelope. I don't suppose I'd have noticed it in the ordinary way of things, but you understand my mind was running on papers, and I was keen to find anything, if possible, that would give some sort of clue to the blighters who'd done that dirty trick on me—remember that I hadn't had a chance to catch a glimpse of them, I hadn't even heard a voice of one of them. And somehow—well, I don't know, one envelope's mighty like another, and a damp and discoloured one isn't altogether such an uncommon object of the countryside, nowadays, but I couldn't help feeling that there was something vaguely familiar about the look of this one. I picked it up and looked at it, and the longer I looked the more certain I felt that I'd seen it before, that 'twas the identical one you'd fished out of the well, skipper. I caught a glimpse of it, you remember, half out of your pocket. May I have some more ham, please? I seem to have recovered my appetite.

"Well, I had a *dekko* at the papers inside the envelope. Of course, I wasn't such a mutt as to suppose that our friends had dropped the precious secret documents for me to pick up, but I was just naturally curious to know what the envelope held. When I saw that there was nothing but circulars, I was flummoxed. Would somebody cut me a piece more bread?

"As you know, skipper, my mental equipment's not of the highest order. And I'd been a good deal shaken up by that little

do, and the state of fury I was in wasn't conducive to calm, clear, cold reasoning. I'd thought of the affair as a sort of rearguard action, supposed our friends had spotted me legging it after them and decided to delay me. (Why they didn't put me right out I can't imagine, but it would appear that though they've no conscientious objections to homicide, they've definite inhibitions as to when, where, and how they shall put in a little quiet murdering.) To question why they should bother to stop and search me simply hadn't occurred to me.

"But now, at last, I saw daylight. If I'd guessed right, and here was the envelope you'd found in the well, it was plain, even to my intelligence, that the papers hadn't been found yet, that the enemy hadn't got 'em. I began to put two and two together; reconstruct things, as it were. I saw them bolting with the envelope, getting away to this bit of sunken road behind the hay-cart—probably it was one of their H.Q.'s—and having a look at what they had. And then they must have been so sick that they chucked the thing away. By George, they must have given us credit for leading 'em up the garden path in a way we'd never even thought of. Well, adopting the Napoleonic method of putting myself in the enemy's place, I reasoned that when they saw me haring up the road they surmised that I'd got the papers and was trying to slip through to civilisation with 'em. Hence the ambush and the very thorough search. As I say, I don't know

why they didn't settle me for good and all, but I suppose they had their reasons; satisfied that I hadn't what they wanted, they didn't care what became of me next. I say, I wonder if I might have still some more ham? This moorland air's turning me into a hog."

"Well, what did you do then, Ratty?" I asked, carving a large, thick slice.

"Well, I really didn't know what to do. (Is there any more beer?) All this time I'd been expecting you three to roll up, and as you didn't come, I imagined you might have gone another way, across country. I didn't like leaving the house unguarded if the papers were still in it, yet I wanted to get into touch with you again. I didn't see what I could do single-handed. And I argued that if we hadn't managed to find the beastly papers in all those hours of searching, it wasn't likely—except by sheer luck—that the enemy would do anything better, even if they did have the place to themselves for a bit. So I decided the only thing was to go on to Redruth and hunt you up."

Rattigan paused, and poured half a glass of beer down his throat. Wiping his lips, he looked at me with an expression of shamed apology that I could not understand.

"The Yanks say," he went on, in a low and abashed voice, "that a fool is a man who stubs his toe against the same nail twice. In that case, I'm the biggest fool on two legs. I'll tell you, now. I went on up the road as fast as I could leg it, and presently away to the left I saw a man's head bob down

behind one of the walls. Well, after all I'd gone through, that was just a bit more than I could stand. If one of the blighters who'd played that foul trick on me was skulking about there, I'd not let him get away till I'd hammered the stuffing out of him. I was over the roadside wall in two ticks, and racing bald-headed for the place where I'd seen the head bob down. Oh yes, I ran into the mousetrap nicely. I got to the wall, put a hand on it, vaulted over—and right in the middle of the vault, while most of me was in the air, something knocked my supporting arm from under me, and I landed flat on my face on the ground on the other side, spread-eagled, with what felt like half the population of Cornwall on top of me."

Avoiding my glance, Rattigan drained his glass.

"They didn't use the sack this time. While about a hundred and fifty of 'em knelt on my back, pinning me down, a dozen or so slid a cloth of some sort over my face, covering it entirely, blinding and gagging me, and knotted it at the back of my head. A few more tied up my wrists and ankles, and there I was, trussed again, as helpless as a kitten, and more wild with myself than I could ever find words for.

"Well, I don't know why they needed to be so damned careful, and do a job twice, but they searched me again. I had an idea that it wasn't the same gang that had gone through my pockets before; I can't quite explain it, but there seemed a difference in their methods. I suppose it was another

detachment. Anyway, the general procedure was the same. And when they'd satisfied themselves that I'd nothing on me that they wanted, one of 'em said, 'That will do. Clear off,' and they went away."

The constable gave a sharp exclamation.

"You did hear a voice, then, sir?" he asked. "Would 'ee recognise un again?"

"I recognised it then," Rattigan said significantly. "I've heard it before, and I'd know it anywhere. It was your legal friend, skipper, who called last night."

"Kesteven?" I exclaimed. "I was certain he was at the bottom of all this."

"Kesteven it was, and he's at the bottom of it all right. And when I get my hands on the perisher——" Rattigan was speechless for a moment, his vivid blue eyes blazing with wrath. Then, "Is there any cheese left?" he asked.

Brenda made an impatient movement.

"And what did you do then, Terry?" she asked.

He shrugged his huge shoulders.

"I managed to wriggle out of the ropes—they weren't tied as well as before—and I give you my word I was thankful to get that cloth off my face. I was pretty nearly suffocated."

"Did you bring the cloth with 'ee, now, sir?" the constable asked.

"I did." Rattigan's voice was complacent. "Though I doubt if it's much use as a clue, constable. Still, I'll show it you, when I've finished lunch."

"And what did you do next?" I asked.

"Oh, I went on to Redruth. I went to the station first, and looked about for you, and then I tried the best hotels, but I couldn't pick up a trace of you anywhere—and then, skipper, I began to get the wind up. Remembering that the papers hadn't been found, and that the enemy were still hanging round here, I thought something had happened to you, with me away. You might have been ambushed, or—or anything. So I decided it was a case for calling in the police, and I went round to the police-station.

"That," Aunt Hattie interrupted, "is the wisest thing any of you have done up to now."

"I saw the superintendent or somebody," Rattigan went on, "and told him the whole story. He was confoundedly sceptical about it—seemed to think I had delusions. When I used the word 'murder' he pulled me up short and asked me what proof I had that any murder had been committed. That stopped my engine, so to speak, because, as you've said, skipper, we've no proof of anything of the kind yet. That's where the enemy are so damnably clever. Still, in the end he seemed to think the affair wanted looking into—though I believe 'tis us he suspects rather than anyone else—and he agreed to send a constable back with me. So he detailed Carne here, who's going to be a useful reinforcement. We went round to a garage and hired a car for as long as we want it, and away we came. I told Carne the whole story as we came along, and he's keen.

He's anxious to find three stripes to put on his sleeve—I gather that when he does, he's going to get married—and if there is a case for the police to be made out of what's been going on here, Constable Carne will make it."

"Good," I said. "I'm sure we'll be very glad of him." But I caught Brenda's glance, and I knew that our thoughts were running on similar lines: with the policeman about the place, we might find it difficult to keep to ourselves the secret of the papers, whatever it was.

"I'm afraid I've made a bit of a mess of it," Rattigan said apologetically. "If I had your brain, now, skipper, or Brenda's——"

"I think you did splendidly, Terry," Brenda said warmly. "Why, if all this hadn't happened, we shouldn't have known that those men hadn't got the papers after all; we should have gone away and left them a clear field. And the car—that's just what we need."

Rattigan's face lit up, and he looked at the girl as a man looks at a woman when he is prepared to die for her. Brenda's glance fell, and a warm colour surged up into her cheeks. I looked away: it was only what one might expect, of course; they were much of an age, and Rattigan was a handsome, attractive youth, with the engaging charm of his race, while I was a dried-up, middle-aged foggy. But——

"Well, now," Rattigan said, lighting a cigarette, "where *did* you get to, skipper, and what have you been up to?"

I gave him an account of our excursion to the old tin mine.

"If we hadn't gone there," I said, with a glance at Aunt Hattie, "if we'd followed you along the road, we'd have saved you a lot of discomfort, and we might have collared some of those fellows."

"Not you," he answered promptly. "They'd not have let you catch sight of 'em. They're as slippery as greased eels. Or if you had—well, God knows what might have happened to you all. No, 'tis better as it is. But tell me more about the dummy, skipper. I can't make that out."

"Nor I," I said. I explained the conclusions I had reached, and he had no fresh suggestion to offer.

"'Tis queer, then," said the constable, pulling at his heavy black moustache. "I can't see into it at all. 'Twas at the old mine up over—" he nodded at the window. "Wheal Roseveare."

"What?" Brenda jerked out. She jumped to her feet and stood staring at him. "What did you call it?"

He looked at her in heavy surprise.

"Wheal Roseveare, miss, that's what they do call 'un. 'Tis the old Cornish name for a tin mine, 'wheal' is."

"Oh, yes," said Brenda vaguely. "I didn't know. Thank you very much. I didn't know a mine was called a 'wheal.'" She turned to me, a curious light dancing in her eyes, excitement plainly surging through her. "Uncle Jack, there's something I want to

ask you about—if you'd just come upstairs——”

I went, wonderingly. She led me in to the nearest room at the top of the stairs, and with an extraordinary air of secrecy closed the door. Then she turned to me with sparkling eyes and pulsating breast.

“Don't you see, Uncle Jack?” she cried. “Don't you *see*? ‘Wheal’!” She clutched at the lapels of my coat with eager, trembling hands. “That's the word daddy tried to write—the word we thought was ‘well.’ I don't know whether he couldn't spell it, or whether—dying as he was—he couldn't quite write it—but that's what he meant. Oh, how near I was to it this afternoon when I thought it might be ‘wheel.’ And we were there, right on the spot, and came away again, when the papers must have been somewhere—we could almost have touched them——”

“Good Lord, Kitten,” I exclaimed. “You mean——”

“Of course,” she said. “It can't be anything else. I was right after all. Poor daddy hid the papers somewhere up there in that old mine.”

XXXV

FOR a few moments I stared at Brenda in amazement. But the longer I thought about her suggestion, the more convinced I felt that she must be right. Although I had doubted that poor old Cecil would have

ventured so far as the mine carrying those documents that men were so anxious to take from him, I reasoned now that he would feel that they were infinitely safer there than in the house. It must have been a queasy business to make an expedition, in the middle of a dark night, across all those bare fields criss-crossed with stone walls, behind every foot of which death itself might be lurking, to an eerie spot like the abandoned mine, but I knew by experience that a mild, peaceable, nervous little man like Lorimer was exactly the type to screw himself up to going through absolutely any ordeal for an ideal, or a question of principle, or to carry out something that he believed to be a sacred trust. He might quake inwardly at every foot of the way—as those of us do who are far more used to danger, if we tell the truth—but once he had made up his mind, death alone would stop him.

“By thunder, Kitten,” I said at last, “I believe you’re right.” I paused as a thought sank in. “The thing that amuses me is that that those other fellows, who’ve been hanging round up there, who’ve very probably been using the place as an H.Q. and an O. Pip, have had the confounded papers under their noses all the time and didn’t know it.”

She nodded, dimpling adorably.

“Of course,” she said, becoming grave, “they’d have no reason to suspect the documents were there. We don’t know what words were on the half they got of poor Daddy’s last message, but they obviously didn’t include

the word 'wheal'—the word that, once you've understood it, is the real clue to where the papers are hidden."

"Oh, quite," I agreed. "Well—now what shall we do about it?"

She eyed me in positive scorn.

"Why, go and get them, of course—and at once."

I shook my head.

"I think it needs a bit more strategy than that, Kitten. We can't all go—because we'd attract so much attention that the enemy would simply stroll along and be waiting there in force, to take the papers when we'd found them."

Brenda's lips set in a hard line, and a pugnacious glint came into her clear eyes.

"Why, we'd fight——" she said.

"Of course we would, but you've got to remember that we don't know what odds would be against us. We've no real idea of how many fellows there are in this gang, but judging by Rattigan's experience to-day there are quite a few. The best fighters in the world, my child, can't hope to beat overwhelming odds; they can only go down with the flag flying, and that's no use in a case like this. We want to get away with those papers, not get half killed in having them taken from us. Strategy is the better part of warfare, and the wise soldier doesn't take on more than he can handle if he can possibly help it."

Brenda said nothing, but a red spot began to glow in her cheeks. I was certain that

she was despising me for what she considered my cowardice. Confound these women; they'd rather have a man pluckily, but stupidly, batter his head against a stone wall than sensibly, but tamely, find the easy way round it.

"Besides," I argued, "we do—don't we?—want to keep to ourselves whatever secret there is in these papers. We don't want the police to see them until we're sure it's advisable. Well, if we all go, we'll have to take this fellow that Terry, with the best of intentions, has wished on us."

The set of her lips relaxed, her eyes became thoughtful.

"Yes," she admitted. "You're quite right, Uncle Jack. I'm all in the dark about this business, but one thing I feel certain of—daddy didn't want the police brought into it, or the first thing he'd have done would be to go to them for protection. And so I want to keep them out of it until we know just exactly what these papers are, and what we ought to do with them."

"It's awkward," I said. "I'm jolly glad Rattigan brought the fellow"—I rather felt that I had seemed to be criticising Terry to her. "He'll be a tower of strength if it comes to a scrap. But while we look on him as being on our side, we've got to try and throw dust in his eyes."

She made a little gesture of impatience.

"Well, what do you propose to do?" she demanded bleakly.

"My idea is," I said, "that only one of us goes up to the mine. I'm the one. The

rest of you will create a diversion—draw off the enemy. I rather think—yes, the best plan will be to start off in the car. That'll draw 'em better than anything. They'll certainly stop it, and there'll certainly be a dust-up—and if we're lucky, we ought to lay hands on one or two of them. They won't be able to play the sack trick on a saloon car, and—yes, it really looks quite promising."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"That sounds to me," she said, "like a positive brainwave. There's only one fault in it."

"And that?" I asked.

"Uncle Jack Carmichael, you're not going up to that mine alone."

"Oh, really?" I said.

"You're not. You're not fit. Why, Uncle Jack dear, this business has put years on you. You're shivering with malaria—yes, I know you think you've been hiding it, but you haven't. That soaking you had this morning has made it a lot worse. You really ought to be in bed with hot-water bottles and whisky and quinine and things. If you think I'm going to let you go stumbling across those fields alone in the dead of night again, and going down that horrible mine shaft, or whatever you call it, without somebody up at the top holding the rope or something, you just don't know me."

"Don't go down the mine, Daddy," I murmured uncontrollably.

The violence of feeling these harmless, if

inane, words aroused in Brenda astounded and bewildered me. The blood rushed into her cheeks, her eyes positively blazed, her little white teeth shut down on her lower lip, and she clenched her fists and actually stamped her foot at me.

"Haven't you any thought for me at all?" she demanded fiercely. "Can't you see what it means to me?" For an instant she checked, while I gaped at her in stupefaction. "Don't you *see*?" she went on, about three decimal points less violently. "You've made yourself ill already over this affair of mine, and I wish to goodness I'd never dragged you into it, and if anything—anything really serious were to happen to you now, I'd never forgive myself."

I stared in amazement at this transformation of Brenda into a little spitfire.

"Er—yes, I see," I said, rather blankly. I really didn't, quite. "But you don't understand, Kitten. You didn't drag me into this. I came, and was jolly glad to come. I'd do a lot more for you than I have done yet; I'd do anything in the world for you; what would it matter if I—well, I wouldn't care if I did go out, if it helped you."

A faint, fugitive smile just touched the corners of her lips.

"It wouldn't help me," she said. "Why, don't you see, Uncle Jack, I've nobody in the world to look after me, now, but you. Besides"—the smile widened, and an impish light danced in her eyes—"strategy is the better part of valour, and the wise soldier

doesn't—what is it?—bite off more than he can chew—to be vulgar—if he can possibly help it."

I laughed, then, with an odd feeling that a moment of strain, a moment full of vague possibilities that I did not understand but that somehow alarmed me, had passed.

"*Kamerad!*" I said. "I climb down. I'll take my nurse with me, Kitten. It will have to be Rattigan, I suppose, since it won't do to take the policeman. Yet I don't like leaving you and Aunt Hattie in charge of one constable. After all, he's an unknown quantity to us. We haven't seen him under fire, so to speak. In spite of his size and his uniform, he might get the wind up and bolt, leaving you in the soup."

She shook her head determinedly.

"No, that won't do," she said. "If anything like a crowd attacked us, one policeman couldn't protect both Aunt Hattie and me *and* take prisoners. No, Terry must be there too."

"But then——" I began to protest.

"Uncle Jack," she said, "before we go any further, you may as well know that it will be sheer waste of time to argue. I'm a good deal like daddy, you know; I don't make up my mind very often, but when I do, it stays made. I've quite made up my mind about this. The person who is coming up to Wheal Roseveare with you is *me*."

I simply stared at her.

"Oh, but dash it all, Kitten——"

Her lips set again.

"I told you it would be no use to argue. I'm determined about this. I won't trust anybody else to look after you. Terry—why, he's only another man, and quite incapable of taking care of anybody properly. Besides"—she looked up at me with appealing, child-like eyes that an anchorite could not have resisted—"I'm an awful funk, Uncle Jack, and I want to go where it's safest. If the car draws off the enemy, as you say, why, the mine will be the safest place, won't it? Especially as you'll be there to take care of me."

As she had said, argument with her was perfectly futile. She wouldn't even be consistent, the minx.

I did not like the idea. I did not like it at all. Anyway, I was not keen on dividing our forces, but it seemed the only possible course to pursue. And, as Brenda had said, the policeman in the car, with both Brenda and Aunt Hattie to look after, would be pretty badly handicapped, he would not be in a position to take the offensive, he might not even be able to defend them successfully. He did not look particularly fertile in resource. If they were all overpowered, if those brutes decided to search them, as they had searched Rattigan——

But Terry and Carne, with only Aunt Hattie to look after, would probably be able to give a pretty good account of themselves. I did not think our opponents would go to the lengths of unnecessary violence, once they were satisfied that none of the party in the

car had the papers. And if our ruse were successful, and the car drew off the whole of the enemy's forces—why, as she said, up at the mine with me would be the safest place.

So I agreed. And then we began to discuss the actual details of the scheme. We heard Rattigan lumbering aimlessly about the landing, and, with a certain conspiratorial air that seemed absurdly theatrical, called him into the conference.

Rather to my surprise, he instantly approved of the plan.

"And if the blighters *do* stop the car," he said exultantly, "and I can lay hands on a few of 'em——" He closed a fist the size of a ham and eyed it affectionately. "Some of 'em," he said, looking up at me, "will never know what hit 'em."

"The only thing is," I said, "what reason can we give Carne for bolting, and, still more difficult, for Brenda and me not coming with you?"

He looked pathetically worried.

"Beyond me," he admitted. "The higher strategy was never my long suit, skipper."

We thought it over.

"You know," I said, "I shouldn't be surprised if there's something in the nature of an attack to-night. If our friends know that a minion of the law has arrived—and you can bet your braces they *do* know—they'll feel that the time's come to strike, get the business over, and be away before the entire county police descend on the place."

Rattigan nodded agreement.

"More than likely," he said. He wrinkled up his forehead again. "What I don't understand," he said, "is why they haven't done so before."

"I'm not sure," I said. "They seem to have been waiting to let us find the papers first. They know we haven't got 'em—at least—no, they don't quite know that. They must have thought you had them on you, Ratty, when they searched you. No, I have it. They argue that when we *do* find them, one or all of us will make a bolt for it, and they've just been waiting to pounce on us when we go. So long as we all stay here, they reason that we haven't found the dashed things yet."

"Yes," Brenda said thoughtfully. "That sounds a reasonable explanation."

"But why haven't they stormed the place," Rattigan asked, "to pinch our half of the clue? That would be as good, to them, as getting the papers."

"I don't know," I said. "But—well, one thing, those methods don't seem to appeal to them. They're very shy of being seen, you know, and you can't deliver a direct attack of that kind and remain absolutely invisible or unrecognisable. Their mental process seems to be that if one of them were seen sufficiently well to be identified later, they'd have to lay out whoever saw them, and, as I said before, though they don't stick at a murder that can be camouflaged as accidental death, they wilt at slaughter that can't possibly be mistaken for anything else."

"That sounds to me," Rattigan said, "like a very good insight into their minds."

"Another thing," I suggested. "Again I'm not sure, but I've a feeling that they *know* our half of the clue has been destroyed; they know that if they laid us all out they'd lose for ever any hope of getting it—kill the goose who could lay the golden eggs, so to speak. That clue only exists in the minds of Brenda and myself; they simply daren't do us in, till they've got the secret out of us."

"Well, you'd have thought they'd try to nobble one of you singly——"

"Haven't they?" I countered. "Didn't they bonnet me and try to abduct me the very night we came down? And that little stunt, with whatever gas it was, in the laboratory? That was planned to sink you and me, Terry, without a trace. If it had succeeded—well, if we had found the papers before we collapsed, they'd have taken them off our corpses."

"Oh!" Brenda cried, and shuddered.

"If not," I pursued, "don't you see that Brenda would have been left alone and undefended—to be put to the third degree, or slow torture, until she told them our half of the clue."

"I wouldn't!" she flashed out. "Nothing would make me. Whatever they did to me, I wouldn't. I'd die first."

I looked at her, at the steady fire in her eyes, the set of her lips, the defiant tilt of her exquisite chin.

"I believe you would," I said. "But

we've got to see that the occasion doesn't arise. Anyway, I think operation orders for to-night are as follows: We begin a last frenzied, sham search for the papers. After a bit we give it up as a bad job, and decide to go back to Redruth *ek dum*. If, as I half expect, anything in the nature of an attack materialises, we'll have an even stronger excuse for going—and going P.D.Q. We'll tell Carne and Aunt Hattie that Brenda and I will go ahead, on foot, to see that the road is clear, and that the rest will follow in the car and pick us up. Only, as soon as we're out of sight, we'll turn off the road and streak straight across country to the mine. You'll go straight along the road, looking for us, and if you don't get held up, I'm a cross-bred Eskimo."

Rattigan looked at me with delight in his eyes.

"You've said it," he chortled. "Skipper, you're a number one topline idea-merchant. I'm on, and when I get amongst those lads—oh, they won't catch me napping a third time: the third time will be mighty unlucky, for them."

I looked at Brenda.

"You agree?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes shining.

"I think it's splendid," she said. "Uncle Jack, you're a great man."

I don't remember ever being so pleased in my life as I was at those few, simple words of praise from a chit of a girl who was almost young enough to be my daughter, and who

only looked on me as an honorary uncle, in any case.

XXXVI

WE began the first part of our plan right away. We went downstairs and found Carne, with an expression of patient suffering on his red, plump face, listening to Miss Winterton's verbal character studies of each of her lost hounds.

"Aunt Hattie," Brenda said crisply, "I'm fed up with this. We're going to have one last hunt for the papers, and if we don't find them we're going to pack up and go back to Redruth—and so home."

Aunt Hattie thrust out her chin.

"*I'm* not going home—not until I've got news of my boys. But now you've had the sense to put the matter in the hands of the police at last, I don't mind going to Redruth. I suppose there's a hotel there?"

"At least one," Brenda assured her.

"That's all right, then. I shall be glad to leave this place. *I* think it's accursed. I'm not one to cry over spilt milk, but if we hadn't come here, I shouldn't have lost my boys——"

For the first time since I had met her, I heard a little choke in Miss Winterton's voice, saw her lips tremble, saw her eyes blink in an effort to keep back tears. Brenda

ran to her and dropped on her knees beside the old lady's chair.

"Ah, Aunt Hattie," she cried remorsefully, "I've been a selfish pig. I've thought of nothing but my own affairs, and these papers. But really, truly, I'm ever so sorry about your dogs—more sorry than I can say. They're such splendid fellows, and I know how much they mean to you."

"If any harm's come to 'em——" Aunt Hattie said grimly.

"We'll hope it hasn't, Auntie. I don't think it has. As soon as we've settled this other business, we'll all turn to and do our level best to find the dogs. And if anything *has* happened to them—well, we'll see that the brutes who did it are punished."

Aunt Hattie snorted.

"That won't bring 'em back," she said. "But—yes, you're right, Brenda; I'd like to see the men punished. Men who'd hurt dumb animals ought to be made an example of."

"They shall," Brenda said confidently.

We set to work then, meticulously examining walls that we had already inspected, searching for something we had not the faintest hope of finding. Brenda and I worked; Terry I had posted at the open front door to keep an eye on the car and give warning of any advance upon the house. He protested that it was too dark and misty to see a thing, but admitted that his ears might still have their uses.

The constable, after watching us stolidly for a few minutes, apparently caught the

fever, for he joined in. He seemed to have a poor opinion of our methods, for he worked alone, upon some elaborate and apparently scientific method of his own involving a great deal of tapping with a pocket rule and minute measurements—a procedure carefully drilled into him, I imagine, from whatever equivalent of infantry training is used in police forces.

At last I glanced at my watch. Ten o'clock. Time, I thought, to be going. The expected attack had not developed, but I did not propose to wait much longer for it. After all, both Aunt Hattie and the constable had accepted our reason for leaving Roseveare; further incentive for our flight seemed unnecessary.

"I think you ladies had better put your hats on," I said. "We'll be off as soon as you're ready. It's no good poking about here any longer; we're simply wasting time."

"You're right," Brenda said, descending from a step-ladder. "Come along, Aunt Hattie."

She lit a candle, and the two of them went upstairs. The constable continued to measure the study wall with his neat little folding rule. I lit a cigarette and strolled to Rattigan's O.P. at the front door. He had screened himself from observation from outside by getting behind an angle of the wall.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne," I asked him, "do you see anyone coming?"

"I can't see a dam' thing on a night like this," he said irritably, "and there's nothing to hear."

"Cheer up and have a gasper," I exhorted him, holding out my case. He was in the act of putting a cigarette to his lips and I had taken out my match-box and was holding a match ready to strike, when the constable's sudden exclamation from the study interrupted us.

"Ah, so that's where 'twas to, then, was it?" he said, and there was excited triumph in his complacent voice.

"Good Lord," said Terry, turning, "has he found something, after all?"

Instinctively we turned and ran into the study. I know that I was still holding the match-box in one hand and the absurd single match in the other, while Rattigan had his unlighted cigarette between his lips.

"What is it, constable?" I asked, as we plunged through the door. "What have you found?"

Carne was standing in the corner beside the deep recess formed by the projecting chimney breast. At his feet were several bricks; in the wall by his head was a dark cavity, about a foot square, and in his hand was a small tin box.

"Blime!" said Rattigan. "Look what a little science can do!"

Brenda and Aunt Hattie, overhearing our excited voices, came running downstairs and into the room. Slowly, ponderously, Carne set the box upon the table.

"Just a moment," Brenda said. Her voice shook a little, and her eyes were bright. "If that was found here, it's my property——"

The constable looked at her, and for the first time I saw suspicion, and the hostility of a policeman towards a suspicious person, in his red face.

"How's that, miss?" he demanded, and there was an edge on his usually sleepy, complacent voice. "Do you identify this box, then?"

"Why, no," Brenda admitted uneasily. "I haven't seen it before. But it must have been my father's; he must have hidden it there; and everything that was his is mine——"

She stretched out a hand towards the box, but with a resolute and inimical gesture the constable laid his big red one over it.

I stood irresolute. I wanted to open the box then and there, for I was not yet satisfied that it contained the papers we were seeking, and upon the answer to that question our immediate movements depended. And yet, lest it might hold the papers, I did not want it opened before the constable's eyes. The position was difficult, and I was cudgelling my brains for a plan to get Carne out of the room for a few minutes, leaving the box behind; it was not easy.

He solved the problem himself, simply and directly and, I had to admit, with a certain tact.

"I take possession of thiccy box," he said ponderously, "in the name of the law; if you do claim un, 'twill be restored to 'ee when th' authorities are satisfied as 'tis your property. But if 'tis any satisfaction to 'ee, miss, I'll open un now, for you to see what's inside."

He tried the lid, it resisted; apparently it was locked. With one mighty wrench of his huge hand he ripped the lid right off, exposing the interior.

"Why, then——" he gasped, staring, "'tis money—notes——"

We crowded round the table, staring. The tin box was packed tightly with bank-notes, some tied in bundles, some loose.

"Oh, said Brenda, in disappointment, "it's only money."

"That's all," I said, feeling half disappointed and half relieved. "You can keep it, constable. We must decide what we're going to do about getting away."

Carne's red face showed his amazement.

"Why," he said, "'tis true you've no claim to 'un—for I'd say 'twas hid away to here before the young lady's father was born—they'm real antique, they notes—but 'tis treasure trove, and we'm entitled, between we, to a percentage——"

"Oh, take the lot," I said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Young man," Aunt Hattie demanded, "do you mean to say you're going to run away?"

"We are," I told her firmly, "for very excellent reasons which I'll explain after we've gone; there's no time to go into them now. Now, what we're going to do is——"

I never finished the sentence, for at that instant a pane of the window crashed to smithereens, and a lump of slate as big across as a man's hand landed with the splintered glass upon the floor.

"Damn!" said Rattigan. "Why the hell did I leave my post? Hoist the shutter, skipper! The balloon's gone up."

He was out in the hall in a moment, slamming the front door, and shooting the massive iron bolts into place. I leaped to the window. The shutter was of the ingenious type that slides down into a socket below the window-frame. In a second I had hauled it up into place and screwed it home.

And then another thought flashed into my harassed brain.

"The car," I said. "We've left it unguarded; they'll get at it. Somebody's got to go out and mount guard over the car."

The constable looked at me stolidly.

"I'll do that, then, captain," he said. "They won't attempt to touch un with I around. I'll nip out of the back door——"

He started to leave the room.

"Take care, constable," I said. "You'd better have my revolver."

He shook his head.

"I won't need 'un, sir. I've got my truncheon. You'd best come along with I and bar the door after I."

I followed him down the passage and let him out by the back door. For a moment his bulky figure loomed black against the background of misty darkness, then, with a heavy tramping of regulation boots, he was gone. His courage may have been of the kind that springs from lack of imagination, but I take off my metaphorical hat to him; he was game to the backbone, was Constable

Came of the Cornwall County Constabulary.

Barring the door, I went back and found that Rattigan had shuttered all the other windows and had rejoined the ladies in the study.

"Now what we're going to do," I began again, "is——"

Aunt Hattie interrupted me with a loud sniff, and Brenda cried, "What's that smell?"

My own nostrils caught it then; the same rather sweet, sickly smell that had so nearly drugged me in the laboratory. For an instant the horror of what it meant chilled my blood. I stared into their faces and in all of them, except Rattigan's, I saw only mild, innocent curiosity and surprise.

Then I woke to action. I know that I shouted, "It's gas!" and began to hustle them out of the room. But the smell was stronger in the hall; I suspected that the foul stuff was being pumped in, somehow, under the front door. Already our eyes were beginning to swim, our heads to feel slightly dizzy and heavy; if this went on——

"Come back," I shouted. They obeyed. "Now listen," I went on, in a low voice. "We're going out through the window. When we're outside, you, Rattigan, and Miss Winterton make for the car; get aboard, start her up, and make for Redruth. Brenda and I will go straight for the road, to make sure it's clear."

"Young man——" Aunt Hattie began.

"It's ten to one they've blocked the road," I said, "and if we all went blinding along in the car, we'd crash. They won't see Brenda

and me going on ahead on foot; they won't look for us, and if we find an obstacle we'll warn you: I'll signal with my flash-lamp. The S.O.S., Terry."

"I forbid Brenda——" Aunt Hattie began again.

"Put that light out," I said. "I'm going to open the window and let off a few rounds to shake 'em up. When Brenda and I are through, you're to follow. Kick up as much row as you can to draw their attention off us."

I pulled out my revolver. Rattigan blew out the lamp. I pulled out the shutter screw and lowered the shutter silently into its socket. The out-of-doors, vague, misty, only a shade lighter than the dense blackness of the room, faintly illumined the opening of the window-frame, and the small square panes. A breath of cold, damp, refreshing night air came sweeping through the broken pane. As silently as I could I raised the lower sash and flung a leg over the sill.

Instantly, from the porch, I heard faint noises; no more than quick breaths, the rustle of movement, and the soft sounds that rubber shoes might make on a gravel path. I levelled my revolver in the direction of the porch and let off three rounds. The detonations crashed and echoed in the night, the flame from the muzzle lit up the mist for brief instants; from the porch came a startled yelp of pain.

As I fired I swung my other leg over the sill and stood in a flower bed. Peering into the mist, I held a hand out sideways to help Brenda.

"I'm all right, Uncle Jack," she whispered, and an instant later she had vaulted over the sill and stood beside me.

"Come on, then," I breathed, and we began to creep toward the gate.

Straining my ears as I went, I heard more soft movements from the porch, and, pushing Brenda in front of me, I turned to face pursuit. But at that instant three more crashing detonations sounded from the window, three spurts of orange flame stabbed the darkness, and Rattigan's voice raised the most ear-piercing, blood-curdling yell that I should think ever came from a human throat.

I turned again and took Brenda's hand. Her fingers twined trustingly, confidently, in mine; I can still remember the thrill the contact gave me.

"Now run!" I whispered, and side by side we pelted across the grass to the gate.

XXXVII

I COULD hear no sounds of pursuit. Rattigan seemed to have been highly successful in creating a diversion, and I concluded that the enemy must have thought, when he blazed away his three rounds, that they had been mistaken in supposing they had seen Brenda and me moving toward the gate; had decided that I must still be at the window, firing. At any rate we could hear a terrific racket

going on at the house, but no following footsteps in our wake.

The gate was open. We passed through and out into the road. For a short way we moved slowly, quietly, so that our footsteps should not ring on the road metal. Then we crossed the road, climbed the wall into the field, and once on the hummocky grass we began to run again.

For the first time, I bestowed my benediction upon those stone walls. Anybody with experience of mist knows how one loses one's sense of direction in it, and when darkness is added the difficulty is more than doubled. If we had had to strike across open country I very much doubt if I should have found the mine that night, probably I should have wandered in the traditional circle. But I knew that on my right a stone wall ran up the hill, and that so long as I did not cross it I was on my correct course. So I edged to the right, and after going what seemed an extraordinary distance—so far did it seem that I began to wonder if I had been fool enough to leave the road on the wrong side of the wall—I bumped with uncomfortable force into slate flakes.

We followed the wall up the hill and came at last to the angle at the top. There we paused for breath, for we were both a little winded.

"Uncle Jack!" Brenda's voice came anxiously out of the murk beside me. "I do hope they're all right. I do hope Aunt Hattie's all right."

"She'll be all right," I assured her. "Rattigan

and the constable can take care of her; if they can't, we couldn't, if we were there."

"I suppose not," she said reluctantly. "But I feel an awful quitter, running away like this and leaving her to face the music."

"To tell you the truth, Kitten," I said, "so do I. But our job's to get these papers, and I'm certain this is the only way to do it. Besides, I feel sure those fellows won't do anything really violent; we've had experience of their curious methods."

I felt her shiver. She drew in her breath with a queer, hissing little sound.

"No," she said slowly. "No. But I wish I were there with them."

For a moment she stood staring down the hill toward the house. We could see nothing, not a shape, not a light, but suddenly, reverberating through the blanket of mist, came a significant sound, a sound that brought relief to our hearts—the roar of a car. So distorting is the effect of mist upon sound waves that we could not follow the direction of the car's flight, but the sound of the engine died away in a rapid diminuendo, faded into silence.

"They've got away, Kitten," I said, and I was surprised to hear my voice hoarse and shaky, "they've got away all right."

She nodded.

"Thank God," she said. "Oh, thank God." She drew another deep breath and then shook herself. "Come along, Uncle Jack," she said, "let's get this over."

XXXVIII

I DON'T mind confessing now, though I fervently hoped I showed no sign of it at the time, that the sight of that deserted mine in the darkness gave me the creeps. It was all very dark and eerie and mysterious, only the gable end of a shed and the tall framework of the winding gear showed black against the sky. That iron skeleton made me think somehow of a gibbet on a lonely heath, with the corpses of highwaymen swinging in chains, and as for the rest of it—well, I'm not superstitious and not very imaginative, but any deserted place on a dark night makes me think of the generations of inhabitants who once lived in it—and they always seem to me to have been unpleasant people who committed horribly violent crimes. It may be morbid of me, and I've no doubt that usually it is a libel on the probably quite harmless dead, but that is how I feel about it. And as for this mine—well, it had probably been worked, in the first place, before English history began, and I felt that Primitive Man had left his unpleasant aura still permeating the place. If a flat-nosed, low-browed, bow-legged gentleman in a skin jumper and a coat of woad had risen from the ground and threatened me with a flint axe, I should have been annoyed, but I don't think I should have felt in the least surprised.

However, I pulled myself together mentally, and searched the ground for the real material

danger that was present—the risk of our tumbling in the dark down the unfenced mine shaft. I dare not switch on my flashlamp, for though even that bright light could not have carried far through the mist, it was just possible, though most unlikely, that there might be someone near enough to see it.

“I think that’s the shaft there,” Brenda whispered, pointing to a dark patch among the tangle of coarse grass beneath the winding gear, almost at our feet.

I whispered back that I believed it was. Why we sank our voices so low I cannot explain, I think it was that the atmosphere of the place oppressed us. Cautiously, though we had no real reason to feel any need for caution, we went forward.

And then my foot caught in something lying on the ground, and I tripped and fell flat on my stomach. For a fraction of a second I lay there, conscious that my face and chest and arms overhung empty space, and then I realised that the thing that had tripped me was soft, and that it was no mere tussock of grass. In an instant I rose on to all fours, whipped round, and pounced upon the object, ramming my knees down and groping with my hands for a throat.

And then I laughed ; I laughed aloud, and the echo came back, hollow and weirdly distorted, from the wall of the shed. The sound was so strident, so demoniacal, that I stopped laughing immediately.

“Uncle Jack !” Brenda’s voice panted above me. “What is it ?”

I jumped up and faced her.

"I'm a prize idiot," I said. "It's our man of straw. I tripped over him, and for the moment I thought he was a real one."

"I thought——" she faltered—"we're right on the edge of the shaft. You might have gone straight in——"

"We'll have to walk carefully," I said, taking a pace forward, and then my foot caught in something else, and I went down again. But this time I felt the thing that had tripped me; it was unmistakably the rope we had found that morning with one end made fast to the dummy's neck. I hauled in the slack in the other direction, and as it rose from where it had lain hidden in the long grass, and began to tauten, I realised that it stretched out over the mine shaft. A sudden thought leaped into my mind.

"Just give me a hand, Brenda," I said. "Haul on this line."

It was a fairly stout rope, and we had to bend our backs over the task of hauling at it. The slack came in, the rope drew tighter, and then rose at an angle into the air before us. In the misty darkness only a few feet of the line were visible, and for a moment the phenomenon of its slope puzzled me; then I realised the truth—the other end of the line was made fast to the wheel of the winding gear.

"By Jove," I said to Brenda, "that's a bit of luck; just the very thing we need. I can slide straight down the shaft on this."

I flung my weight on the rope to test the strain, but she clutched at my arm urgently.

"Uncle Jack, take care. Don't go down yet. It might not be properly fastened or something."

"It doesn't show any sign of giving," I said, dragging at the line.

"No, but really, we must make sure. Look here, you stay here, and I'll go up to the wheel and make sure it's properly secure."

"Not much," I said. "I'm not going to have you cavorting round this dashed unpleasant hole in this fog. We'll go up to the wheel together."

Of course, the minx had to argue about it, declaring that she would be perfectly all right, that she was more sure-footed than I, and a great deal more nonsense of that sort, until, to prevent any more waste of time, I took her firmly by the arm and marched her off across the coarse grass, keeping a sharp eye on the black cavity at my left hand.

There was nothing in the shape of a ladder attached to the frame of the winding gear; the only way to the top was by straddling one of the sloping girders and working upward. I didn't think that Brenda would be able to tackle it, but she shinned up like a monkey, and I honestly confess that I had hard work to keep up with her.

As I think I have said before, I haven't a good head for heights, and I was afraid that as we climbed higher I should feel dizzy, but I could see nothing below or around me but the thick black fog, and the blacker girder just in front of me, and Brenda's slim figure, a little vague, shinning ahead, and my head kept steady.

The climb seemed interminable, but at last we found ourselves rising out of the mist, with a blue, star-speckled sky above us, and a grey sea, that looked almost solid, below. A few feet further, and then we were level with the rim of the big wheel.

Groping, we found the end of the rope, made fast to the girder. As I pawed the knot I was thankful that Brenda had insisted upon examining it, for it was most slackly tied. It *might* have held under the strain of my weight, but I doubted it.

Brenda took a turn of the slack round the girder, and I cast the knot loose and hitched it round again, firmly enough to stand the weight of a grand piano.

"Right ho, Kitten," I said. "You stay here and keep an eye on the rope. I'm going straight down. Look here, you'd better have my revolver. I don't suppose anyone will come along, but if they do, and try to butt in, give 'em three rounds rapid."

She nodded in silence, and took the weapon. Gripping the line, I swung over the mine shaft, and lowered myself down hand over hand.

For a little while I seemed to be dropping through nothing but dark grey mist, spinning and twisting as I went. I could see nothing of the shaft, nor of the ground around it. But presently I realised that I was actually in the shaft, below ground level, and as I swung a little, pendulum-wise, I brushed against a jagged wall of rock. For an instant I thought of the drop below me—I had no idea of the

actual depth of the shaft, but I knew that some of these mines ran thousands of feet down into the rock—and as I spun dizzily round, my flesh shrank in anticipation of the bone-shattering crash with which I should strike bottom if I lost my grip on the rope and fell.

Gripping the rope with my knees, I let go with my right hand, groped in my jacket, and brought out my flash-lamp. I switched it on. Its beam struggled feebly through the mist, and picked out dimly the rugged surface of rock. Somewhere in this rough wall, if Brenda's guess were right, I expected to find a cavity of some sort, and in it the papers that our opponents wanted so badly, that we had endured a good deal in our attempt to find and hold, and on account of which men had already died. Holding the lamp as steady as I could, I got a purchase against the wall with one foot and gyrated, peering at the dim rock wall. I found to my discomfort that my gyration twisted the rope, which insisted on untwisting itself, spinning me round at an uncomfortable and dizzying speed.

My survey revealed no dark hole in the rock, and I lowered myself a foot, and spun round again, peering and flashing my lamp. It seemed to me that this was going to be a long job, and I wondered if Brenda, perched up there at the top of the winding-tower, would become anxious about me.

So I went down, dropping a foot at a time, stopping and peering at the sides of the shaft, spinning round like a spoon at the end of a

herring line. And at last I found what I sought.

How deep I had gone I cannot say. I could form no estimate at the time, and I have never gone down again to ascertain; neither do I ever intend to do so. Wheal Roseveare may remain deserted till the crack of doom, so far as I am concerned. Actually, I do not think I penetrated to any very great depth. At any rate, as I sank and spun round, the light of my torch flashed on a small dark recess in the rock wall, a kind of miniature cave about a couple of feet square. I saw it for an instant as I revolved, and then lost it. I could not now reach the wall with feet or hands to brake, but with a vigorous heave I started myself swinging to and fro, pendulum-wise. The combined movement made me feel dizzy, and a little sick, but by degrees I ceased to gyrate, and was swinging steadily toward and from the recess. And keeping the light of the torch steadily upon it, I was able to make out the shape of a flat, square tin box, lying on the flat floor of the miniature cave.

I had considerable difficulty, with no purchase to get my feet against, in getting up swing long enough to reach the wall, but I managed it at last, and gripping tightly with knees and feet, I let go with my hands and stretched them out to grip the box and snatch it from its hiding place.

At my first attempt I missed; my swing was just a few inches too short, and I had to work it up all over again. To and fro I swung, nearer and nearer to my objective, and at last

I felt that I was easily within reach. I shot my arms forward, seized the box with my hands, and drew it out with me as I swung back into the centre of the shaft. In that moment of triumph I lost grip with my knees, and had to catch frenziedly at the rope with one hand to save myself from falling into the depths below me. I can assure you that needed a definite effort of reason to conquer the instinct to grab with both hands and let the precious box go, but I managed to hug it to my breast with my left hand while I grabbed at the rope with my right.

I hung there for a few moments, swinging and twisting, and wondering how poor old Cecil had found this hiding-place. I did not suppose that he had hacked it out of the rock that night when he hid the papers. I gathered that in his researches he often went down mine shafts, and it was quite likely that he had explored this one, so near Trewerry House, more than once. I thought of him coming down a rope, as I had done, twirling and swinging as I had done, with that confounded tin box under his arm, and kicking his way to the wall of the shaft until he could tuck the box away, and once more I marvelled at the courage and determination of the fragile, spectacled little scientist.

At this moment I heard Brenda's voice coming, faint and blurred, through the mist and down the shaft.

"Uncle Jack!" it called, and I heard a note of urgency, and of secrecy too, in its tone. "Uncle Jack!"

"Coming!" I called back triumphantly, my voice echoing eerily in the hollow shaft. "Shan't be long. And I've got it, Brenda; I've got it!"

"Uncle Jack!" she called again, more loudly and still more anxiously. "Uncle——"

Her voice stopped short, as if a hand had been clapped over her mouth, and then, reverberating down the shaft, came the sharp, ringing detonation of a revolver shot.

"Brenda!" I called again, but no answer came back.

What was happening up there I did not know, but, hugging the box tightly under my arm, I began to swarm up the rope as quickly as I could go. The opening above me almost shone, a misty grey disc, against the black tunnel of the shaft. Steadily I climbed toward it, and then began to mount as quickly as I could, cursing my own slowness, as from somewhere above a shrill scream split the air.

I knew well enough then the meaning of Brenda's cry, its sudden cessation, and the single shot. We had not, after all, completely thrown the enemy off our track; some of them had noticed our absence from the car, had presumably searched for us, and either guessing that we had gone to the mine, or tracking us in some way, had followed us there. Somehow they had crept up to Brenda without her observing them, and had pounced upon her. She had only been able to let off one round, and then—they'd got her. And that scream—What were they doing to her up there?

I was tempted to throw the box, whatever

its contents might be, to the bottom of the shaft, in order to free my hands; I clung to it instinctively, I think, rather as a possible weapon, since I was unarmed, than with any thought of its value otherwise.

I was within six feet of the lip of the shaft, trying to decide how I could make an effective landing on the framework of the winding gear, in the face of opposition, when I felt the rope swinging toward the side of the shaft, and a moment later I struck the rock wall with a force that knocked most of the breath out of my body.

I understood, of course, what was happening. I had had, I confess, a horrid vision of myself clambering up that rope to the winding gear, a helpless mark for a bullet from anyone able to see me through the murk, but now I realised that so long as I had the box, they would take no risk of my falling down the shaft with it in my possession. They would not even chance a possible struggle at the winding wheel. Somebody had hooked the rope and hauled it to the brink of the shaft, and as I reached the top I should be carefully assisted out, the box would be taken from me and, in all probability, I should be incontinently knocked on the head and thrown back down the pit.

I could see no way of avoiding this; in other circumstances I could have waited, and, making the most of the strategic position that my possession of the box gave me, either refused to come up or made terms of some kind. But I could not afford to wait; with Brenda in the

hands of those blackguards I dared not wait. I must try to rush them somehow.

I very nearly succeeded. As I neared the brink, a vague dark shadow blurred its outline; somebody, certainly not Brenda, was peering down into the darkness of the shaft. It moved back again; waited for me, out of sight. Gripping again with knees and feet, I groped in my pocket for my torch, brought it out, and holding it in the palm of my right hand, climbed upward again.

The shadowy form loomed over me. "So there you are, then?" said a raucous Cockney voice, and a hand grabbed my coat collar and hauled me upward.

"Don't go down the mine, daddy!" the voice said, as the fellow lugged me over the edge. He was still stooping as I got my knees on to level ground. I straightened suddenly, and swinging the tin box, landed him an awkward but heavy swipe on the head with the corner of it. He dropped like a log, but at the same instant I realised that other men were close about me. I swung round to face them, and flashed my torch straight into the eyes of the nearest, dazzling him. As he took a pace backward I got in a quick jab on the point of his jaw with the fist that held the torch. He sagged limply and dropped away in the mist. If I had been given another two or three seconds I believe I could have got away, but actually, before I could recover my balance from the swing of the blow, someone knocked my feet from under me, and even as I fell, the box was torn out of my hand. The force of my fall

winded me, my head struck against a boulder with a sickening crash that half stunned me, and before I could pull myself together and scramble to my feet, half a dozen hands grabbed me and rolled me over, over the brink of the pit,

I made one desperate grab at a tussock of grass, and held it just sufficiently long for my legs to swing downward. Then the roots gave, the tussock came away in my hand, and I was dropping, feet first, straight down the shaft.

XXXIX

IT was sheer luck, or Providence; certainly it was through no judgment or agility on my part that I fell with one arm round the rope. Of course, I went back into that infernal pit at the same spot as I had come up, where the rope still hung, but my catching it or missing it was a mere matter of inches. I say with the most solemn and reverent conviction that I am sure Providence was watching over me that night.

I was so stunned and shaken that for a few moments I did not realise that my arm was round the rope. I made no attempt to seize it with my other hand, to stop my fall. I only hugged the line instinctively between my arm and my body as I slid, till the friction set my sleeve and jacket smouldering. That brought me to my senses, and I clawed at the rope with

both hands and somehow brought myself to a stop, though not before the skin had been torn off both my palms.

There I hung, panting and dizzy, an excruciating pain seeming to split my head in halves, my raw palms smarting intolerably. I felt that I had gone far deeper than the level at which I had found the box, and looking up I saw that the mouth of the shaft was far smaller and fainter than before, but I had no other idea of my surroundings. My torch was gone, but perhaps this was as well; the enemy might possibly be peering over the brink, and if I had, unthinkingly, flashed a light, it would have told them that I had not fallen to my death.

This thought was uppermost in my mind—that they might be anxious to make sure that I was gone: might be listening for the sound of my body striking the bottom. I was in terror lest, having any doubt on that score, they might cut the rope, and ruin my last chance of escape. I wondered if I could find a loose boulder in the wall that I could dislodge and send crashing to the bottom. The rope still hung near, though not quite close to, the wall, and cautiously, for I did not want to agitate the rope more than I could help, I began to feel round the rock wall with my feet.

I could find nothing loose; the wall was sheer. I was in an agony to climb up again before they cut the rope, and yet I knew that if they were still watching up above, it would be futile to do anything of the kind. As soon as I reached the

top they would settle beyond doubt any question of my surviving. No, I must first convince them, so far as I could, that I had dropped straight to the bottom. And I would have to be mighty quick about it, or any noise I might make would come altogether too late to be convincing.

I slid down perhaps another twenty feet, every inch a fresh agony to my hands, and then my feet touched something; something soft. I slid another few inches, and one foot stood upon something solid, though the other still hung over the abyss. Still clinging to the rope with one hand, I set my second foot beside the first and stooped, feeling the soft, shaggy thing that my foot had touched first. In an instant I realised what it was. With an effort I pushed it over the edge of the ledge, and shrank back, clinging to the rope and listening. I suppose about two seconds passed, but they seemed like hours; then up the shaft, echoing like distant, muffled thunder, came the sound of a soft impact, God knows how many hundred feet further below. Whether those above heard it I could not tell, but I had done all I could.

I waited for sounds of some kind from above, but none came. I stood there uneasily, precariously, in the darkness, clinging to the rope. In default of any indication that the enemy had gone, I dare not start to swarm up again yet: the movement of the rope would betray the fact that I still lived. I must wait a little while. To wait was almost intolerable, with Brenda in the hands of those blackguards,

yet there was no sense in getting killed: I should be no help to her dead.

As I waited, I thought. One mystery, at any rate was cleared up—the disappearance of the Alsatians. It was one of Miss Winterton's hounds that my foot had touched, that I had pushed over the brink and down to the bottom of the pit. The others, I had no doubt at all, already lay there down below, crushed and mangled. I understood what had happened. One of our opponents, running fast, had lured Aunt Hattie's pack up to the mine, to the edge of the shaft, and then—I realised at last the purpose of that dummy on the end of the rope made fast to the winding gear. As the hounds reached the brink of the pit, the man they were hunting would have thrown himself down: another, hidden somewhere, had yanked the dummy out of the grass and swung it over the shaft: the hounds had plunged forward in the darkness—even if they realised that they were leaping out over a void, they would have no time to check—and the wretched animals had gone plunging down into the depths. I imagined one of them, at any rate, rebounding from one rock wall to the other until he struck, and rested on, the rocky ledge on which I stood.

I am a dog-lover, and the fiendish cruelty of the thing infuriated me: if Mr. Kesteven, or one of his hirelings, had been within reach of my fists just then, battered and torn and aching though I was, I would have given him an opportunity to discover what real physical pain is.

By this time my eyes were becoming focussed to the darkness of the shaft, and I was able to make out something of my surroundings. I was perched upon a narrow lip of rock that projected from the wall ; on either hand the sheer rock curved round ; opposite, invisible to my eyes, was the far side of the shaft, below me lay depths unfathomable ; at my back——

Gripping the rope more tightly, I started to wriggle round to examine the wall behind me. At the same moment I felt the rope tighten, so suddenly that I was almost jerked off my feet. Whether my friends above had doubts about my death, or whether they merely wanted to retrieve their rope, I could not say, but I dare not let them either haul me up nor take the rope away from me. I clung desperately, but the line began to slip through my lacerated palms. I could not hold it, and the pain was agonising. Desperately I peered about me, searching for a jagged jut of rock upon which I could get a purchase. There were several along the lip of the ledge, and hauling up the slack a little I hitched it firmly, and held the loose end.

The strain on the rope increased ; it groaned and creaked, and I had a horrid fear that it might break ; but it held, and my hitch held. I heard no sound from above : I stood there in the silence and darkness, watching the strained and quivering line that was my only link with the world, my only hope of life. Presently a sound floated down the shaft ; a low murmur, blurred and inarticulate to my ears. An

instant's silence followed, then came a rapid, rustling, slithering sound, and the whole length of the rope came tumbling down.

Dropping from that height, it was heavy enough to knock me off my perch, down into the depths below, and instinctively I dodged backward, tripped, and fell on my back, with my legs overhanging the pit, while the rope dropped past me, down to the bottom.

For a few moments I lay there, aghast at this catastrophe, my brain too stunned by the shock even to think coherently. You must remember that I had been badly knocked about ; my head felt as if it had been sawn in halves, and the raw edges were rubbing together ; the smarting of my torn palms was excruciating ; and my old enemy, malaria, was shaking me like a jelly. Add to that the foul air in the shaft, soaking into my lungs, making breathing a difficulty and numbing my brain.

When I began to think again, I first had a crazy idea that since I could no longer clamber up the rope to the top, I must go down it to the bottom of the shaft. What I expected to find there, to do there, I don't know : the whole thought was unreasoning. If I had followed it, I certainly should never have come out alive.

Slowly my brain began to clear a little, and I realised two things—the fact that I was lying on my back, on a ledge that I had thought barely gave me foothold, and a sensation of something solid above my face as I lay, not far above me. I lifted my hand to try and

reach it, but it was higher than arm's length. For a little while I lay staring curiously into the blackness, and became conscious of a faint dark arch-shaped curving over me, somewhere above my waist.

And then I understood. The little ledge, a curious flaw in the relative smoothness of the wall of the shaft, marked an opening; it was the threshold, so to speak, of a gallery, a tunnel driven horizontally from the main shaft into the wall of rock. With infinite care I wriggled backward, drawing my legs over the lip of the ledge, struggled into a sitting position, and then began to rise erect. As I did so I lifted my hand above my head, and soon it touched the roof of the tunnel. I could not stand upright, but at least I could walk in a stooping attitude.

A flash of hope darted into my brain. I knew little about mines, especially tin mines, but I remembered that in the case of a shaft sunk in a hilltop, as this one was, these horizontal galleries often ran right through to the slope of the hill and had a separate exit in an adit there. It was possible that this one might do so: if it did, and no fall of rock had blocked it, at the other end of it would lie a way of escape for me. Once out, I could go to rescue Brenda.

The thought stimulated and nerved me to an effort that a moment before had seemed beyond my physical strength. Turning my back on the arch and peering into the even deeper darkness of the tunnel, I believed I could see, at some tremendous distance, a

faint speck of light. It vanished again immediately, but I had no doubt that I had seen it; that somewhere at the far end of the tunnel lay open country and open air.

I wished I had my torch, but so elated was I at the new hope that filled my mind that its loss did not seriously discompose me. Stooping low to avoid crashing my head against the rock roof, I began to walk—I think that “stumble” would really be a better word—along the rough rock floor of the gallery.

I remember little of that awful walk; neither how far I went, nor how long it took me. Actually both distance and time must have been short, but I seemed to walk endless miles and it seemed to take æons of time. I know that often I stumbled and fell, cutting and bruising myself. I know that every now and again I saw that beckoning speck of light, now here, now there, as if the tunnel turned and twisted like a snake. I know that toward the end I seemed to see the thing I longed to see—a wide open tunnel mouth, at times framed by massive, rough-hewn rock, at others a sweeping arch flanked by Corinthian pillars, sometimes draped with curtains of vivid emerald green; at others a keyhole-shaped Moorish doorway such as I had seen in mosques in the towns down the East African coast. And through that ever-changing archway I could see green fields, shining in clear sunlight; shady groves of trees under which I should be able to lie and rest; waterfalls shimmering and sparkling; placid rivers shining, waiting to slake the agonising thirst that parched my throat and

mouth and swollen tongue. I have known thirst in the desert, but never such a thirst as tortured me then; I have seen many mirages, but never one so tantalising as the vision that swam before my eyes as I stumbled through that tunnel in the heart of the Cornish slate.

And then the vision faded, and my hands, stretched out toward it, touched a wall of cold, rugged rock. I felt along it desperately, searching for an opening, but found none. The shock brought my dazed and whirling mind back to reality and clear perception; I realised that all I had seen had been delusion; there was no exit from the tunnel, no archway, no accessible country beyond. The gallery stopped short at a massive wall of rock: I could go no further: there was no escape.

I found, afterwards, that my knuckles and the backs of my hands were as raw as my palms. I think that in the agony of my despair I beat and hammered at that wall of rock with my bare fists, trying crazily to beat it down. It is very likely. It is, I think, amazing that I did not batter my head against the rock and dash my brains out. Why I did not go stark, staring, raving mad, I don't know.

I have no recollection of turning and making my way back along the gallery to the shaft. I don't know how I did it; I think that probably I crawled on my hands and knees. My next memory is of approaching the mouth of the tunnel—it seemed quite light to me now—and hearing, as I went, sounds from the pit-head above.

They came down distorted and confused in the most extraordinary way, echoing and reverberating from the walls of the shaft ; but I could make out the unmistakable sounds of a fight going on up above there. There were shouts, and every now and then the detonation of a revolver shot would come echoing down the pit like the rattle of spasmodic machine-gun fire.

I lay there on the tunnel floor, limp and choking, barely conscious, but thinking triumphantly that someone—Terry and reinforcements of some kind—had come at last, that Brenda would be rescued, and presently somebody would come down for me.

But the noise died away ; there was a silence that seemed interminable. I lay there, with hope dying and the most awful despair taking possession of my mind. Had they given me up for dead ? Would no one come to search for me, in case I might be alive ? Wouldn't they even try to find my body ?

And then at last the noise broke out again : more shouts, more shots. It only lasted a little while, and then silence fell once more. Hour after hour seemed to pass. I was scarcely conscious ; I only wanted to close my eyes and sleep. I knew that if I slept I should never waken, but I did not consciously care. Yet something subconscious, something within me that was stronger and greater than myself, kept my eyes open, my brain clinging to the last shred of consciousness, telling me that I must keep awake, at all costs I must keep awake, for someone would surely come.

And at last, out through the mouth of the gallery, my dimming eyes saw a flickering white light, my failing ears heard a hollow, booming voice calling my name :

“ Carmichael ! Carmichael ! ”

The sound roused my last remaining ounce of strength. I got to my hands and knees again and crawled to the ledge. The white light was swinging round and round the shaft : the hollow voice was calling. Somehow I lifted a hand and waved it ; somehow I forced a croaking sound out of my cracked throat.

There was no sign that the searcher had seen or heard me ; but the spinning light dropped lower, the voice came nearer. Then the light leaped suddenly upon me, blinding me. I lifted my hand again, croaked again. And then the voice, Terry Rattigan's voice, roared, deafening me after all those æons of silence I had endured :

“ Above, there ! Found ! ”

The rest is very blurred. I realised that Terry had landed on the ledge beside me ; I felt his arms lifting me, fastening a rope round under my armpits. His deafening voice shouted again, and I felt myself rising, rising upward, up out of the dark depths, up into the cold, clear air that I gulped in gaspingly, though it seemed as if it would burst my lungs. At last hands seized me again, and hauled me over the edge of the shaft, and laid me down on soft, cool grass, and somebody poured a fiery spirit down my throat that made me gasp and choke and splutter in semi-suffocation.

And then arms were round me ; a soft cheek was pressed to mine ; tears poured down on to my face, and Brenda's voice was saying, over and over and over again :

" Oh, my darling, my beloved ! Oh, thank God, thank God, thank God ! "

XL

THE next thing I knew, I awoke to find myself in bed in a perfectly strange bedroom, with a perfectly strange young woman in a white overall and cap sitting by the window reading a magazine. I looked at her for a few moments, wondering who in thunder she was, and where I was, and what it was all about, and then I realised that I wanted to drink a river dry.

I suppose I must have moved, because in an instant the girl dropped the magazine and was at my side holding a glass to my lips. I tried to drain it at a gulp, but to my indignant amazement she took it away before I had had more than a mouthful, and put it down on a little table beside the bed. I know I glared at her and called her a pig.

" Do you realise," I said, " that I could empty Niagara ? If you knew what thirst was—— "

I found to my amazement that my eyes were full of tears. I was so weak, and felt

so miserably that this callous creature was taking advantage of my weakness, that I could have wept bitterly.

"You shall have some more in a few minutes," she said pleasantly, but very firmly. "You mustn't have too much at a time."

I saw that there was no arguing with the wench; I didn't feel up to an argument, anyway, just then. But, by Jove, when I felt better I'd tell her what I thought of her, and when I found out who'd put me in the power of a nasty, mean little chit who refused water to a man with a throat like a lime-kiln, I'd have a few things to say to him, too. But for the present——

"It's jolly good water," I said.

"It's barley water," she told me, and smiled; it was extraordinary what a pretty smile she had; nobody but her victims, such as myself, would ever guess that it hid such a mean, cruel nature.

"I thought barley water was muck," I told her crudely. "But that's the most delicious drink I ever tasted. It must be a very special kind."

"Perhaps it is," she said, as if it were not in the least an important subject.

"Anyway," I told her, "the few minutes are up, and I want some more."

She let me finish the glassful then, and I felt better. I began to remember.

"Where's Brenda," I asked. "Is she all right?"

"Miss Lorimer is quite all right," she assured me.

"And Terry? Is he all right? Did he come up again?"

"Mr. Rattigan is quite all right," she said.

"I suppose they lowered the rope down again," I said. "Give me another drink, will you, please?"

She gave me some more, and I began to tell her that I wanted to see Brenda and Terry; it was most important; but somehow or other I couldn't finish the sentence, and my eyes shut themselves, and next time I opened them the room was flooded with electric light, and another nurse was sitting by the fireplace, sewing. I stretched out a hand for the glass, and knocked it over. She jumped up, and started toward me, but my groping, heavily bandaged fingers grabbed the handle of the jug and I'd hoisted myself up, put the jug to my lips, and poured about a pint of that exquisite barley water down my throat before she could get it away from me.

"And it's no use trying to tick me off," I told her, very firmly. "When I'm dry I want a drink, and I'm thundering well going to have one. You may think you know best, but you don't. I feel lots better for that."

"I expect you do," she said, smiling. "But why not drink out of a glass, properly? Would you like some more?"

"Can I"? I asked.

"But, of course. You can have as much as you like—now."

She picked up the glass, filled it, and held it to my lips. After all, my bandaged hands

were so clumsy that I should probably have dropped it.

"You," I told her between gulps, "are what I *call* a nurse—a ministering angel thou——"

"That's all right," she said crisply, and took the glass away. "How do you feel now?"

"Fit as anything," I told her. To demonstrate the fact, I tried to sit up, and found I couldn't. It was ridiculous, exasperating, but I had to flop back on the pillow. "I'm afraid I'm not quite as fit as I thought," I said apologetically.

She smiled at me with angelic indulgence.

"Of course you're not," she said. "You're weak. I understand you've been through a bad time. But you're all right, really. You've slept for about forty-four hours, and the doctor says you'll do."

"Of course I'll do. May I ask where I am?"

"Certainly. You're in a nursing home at Redruth."

"Well, then, where are Brenda and Terry?"

"They're downstairs, waiting for you to wake up. Would you like to see them?"

"If it isn't against the regulations."

"Oh, no. The doctor said they could see you for a little while, when you woke up, if you seemed as well as he thought you would be. I'll fetch them."

She went out of the room, and I struggled up, clawed at the jug with both hands, and nearly finished the barley water.

XLI

THEY came in together, Brenda outwardly composed as ever, yet, I could see, with anxiety and concern in her clear, steady blue eyes; Rattigan brisk and breezy, but treading with the awkward carefulness of a big, open-air man in that unaccustomed place, a sick-room.

"Hullo, you old badger," Terry said. "*Comme ça va?*"

He lumbered across to the bedside, grabbed at one of my bandaged hands, and then remembered that a touch on it would probably give me hell. He let it go, sat down on the side of the bed, said "Poor old badger," and blew his nose several times.

Brenda had paused at the door to speak to the nurse. I suppose she was insisting on a private interview, because the nurse went away, closing the door behind her. Then Brenda came forward, dropped into the chair beside the bed, took hold of my hand gently and held it as if she never meant to let go. Her eyes were full of tears; she sat and looked and looked at me as if she were afraid I should vanish or something if she turned her gaze away.

"Oh, Uncle Jack——" she faltered, gulped, and then was silent.

I felt that the emotional situation was rather highly charged, and I've the average Englishman's horror of a demonstrative scene.

"Look here," I said, "tell me all about what has happened. It seems to me there's quite a lot to explain."

They seemed to understand and share my feelings. Brenda looked at Terry, and Terry looked at Brenda.

"Ladies first," said Rattigan.

"As you like," Brenda said, "and I certainly think my part comes first, logically. I haven't really a lot to tell, Uncle Jack. After you had gone down that horrible mine, I sat there astride that girder thing, waiting, and watching the rope to see that it didn't slip. You seemed to be hours and hours down there, and I wondered what could be happening to you. I got frightfully anxious and alarmed, and I wanted to call out to you to ask if you were all right, but I thought it wouldn't be wise, so I just sat quiet. Everything was so still and silent in that mist; I could see nothing, hear nothing; I felt as if I were cut off from the world, floating about in space.

"And then suddenly I heard a sound somewhere below me. I couldn't identify it as any particular kind of sound, but—well, it wasn't a natural one, if you know what I mean. I sort of sat up, mentally, and waited, listening. I listened a long time and heard nothing; I thought at last I must have been mistaken, and I was just relaxing again when I heard it again, quite close to me; a sound of somebody moving.

"My first thought was for you, Uncle Jack; you were so horribly helpless, dangling down there at the end of a rope, and I thought I'd

better warn you. So I called out. Did you hear me? "

I nodded.

" Yes," I said, " and I started to come back as fast as I could."

" I wondered for a minute," she went on, " if I'd been wise to draw attention to the fact that you were about—but they would know that I shouldn't be there alone; that somebody must be with me; and they'd probably guess where you were. And then I heard you shouting that you'd found the papers. So I called again, and the same instant an arm was flung round me, throwing me down on the girder, and yet holding me from falling, and at the same time a horrible hard hand was clapped over my mouth, half stifling me. I couldn't get out another cry, but I had your revolver in my hand, and I pressed the trigger. I couldn't move my arm to aim, you know, so I don't know where the bullet went. Before I could pull the trigger again another hand wrenched the revolver away from me."

" Swine," said Rattigan, shifting uneasily.

Brenda smiled at him.

" I don't know," she went on, " how many of them there were, or how they managed to climb up that framework so silently, but it seemed as if they were swarming all round me, like monkeys in a tree-top. While the first one held me pinned to the girder, another gagged me with a beastly piece of stuff of some kind, and then they lugged me down the girder. I couldn't struggle much, you see, because I might have fallen off down that awful pit.

I rather wondered why they didn't throw me down and have done with it, but I suppose they had a reason; perhaps their big idea was to keep me to use as a decoy if necessary.

"Anyway, they got me down to the ground, and I was all prepared, the moment I touched solid earth, to kick myself free and make a bolt for it. But they were far too wily to give me a chance to do anything of the kind. While I was still two or three feet from the ground, they simply threw me down flat, and before I could pick myself up they pounced on me and tied my wrists and ankles. I must say they weren't rougher than was necessary, but that was quite rough enough."

Terry made another uneasy movement.

"If only I'd known at the time," he said reminiscently, "I'd have socked 'em twice as hard."

"Well, then," Brenda continued, "they picked me up and carried me to that shed we went into the previous day—you remember, Uncle Jack? They put me down on the ground, and left me there, with a man on guard over me. I must say he behaved decently—didn't touch me, or come near me, or anything. He didn't talk, either—and of course I couldn't—he just sat there, stolidly, with his head in his hands. Several times I thought he had gone to sleep, but every time I made a movement his head jerked up.

"So there I lay, helpless, and you can imagine what my feelings were, Uncle Jack. I didn't know what could be happening to you,

but I knew it must be something dreadful. I remembered what Terry had done when they tied him up, and I struggled and strained at the cords, but they wouldn't move, and I tried to find a bit of sharp slate I could edge to, but there didn't seem to be one.

"I strained my ears to listen for sounds of what was happening outside, but for some time I could hear nothing, and then at last there was a scuffling sound. I couldn't hear much, and it only lasted a few seconds."

"That was me breaking cover," I said, "and getting pushed back over the edge."

Brenda shuddered.

"I don't know how you came through alive," she said, wonderingly. "It was a miracle."

I nodded.

"It was," I said. "Well?"

"Well, after that there was a lot of jabbering. I couldn't make out much of it, except a few words like 'box' and 'papers' and 'money.' And then there was some talk about the rope, somebody didn't want it left hanging down the shaft. I gathered they were trying to haul it up and couldn't, and then I think they cut it. And then there seemed to be some kind of argument about 'the girl'—I suppose that meant me. I imagine that some of them wanted to throw me down the pit and others argued that as I couldn't have seen any of them, in the darkness, well enough to identify them, I wasn't dangerous and they might as well let me go. I wasn't worth 'swinging for,' they said. And

there was some other argument about the best way to go back to 'the Smoke'—whatever 'the Smoke' is."

"London," I told her. "Cockney word."

"Well, they were quite a little time over these arguments, but at last I could hear them all coming towards the shed. I didn't know how the argument over me had gone, and whether they were coming to set me free or"—her voice shook a little—"kill me. I just lay there, waiting. I'm not sure that I cared very much what they did to me. I was past caring, for I was sure, by then, that you must be dead, Uncle Jack."

"I was as near it as I care to be," I told her.

She gave my hand a little squeeze—it hurt like fury, but I managed not to show it—and her eyes brimmed again.

"Well," she said, "just as, judging by the sound, they reached the door of the shed, there was a sudden shout, and the noise of a rush, and then a perfectly horrible sound of men fighting. My guard jumped up and ran out to join in. At first they fought almost in silence. I could hear nothing but scuffling feet and panting breaths and thudding sounds, and once a man fell against the wall of the shed, shaking it all over. And then a shot was fired, and then several others; it sounded ever so much worse, the shots banging, and men snarling, and somebody screamed, and another man fell up against the shed, and he made—oh, a dreadful sound; a sort of choking, rattling cough, and I

heard him slip down against the wall, quite slowly, and then pitch to the ground. I'm sure he was killed."

Terry caught my questioning glance, and nodded grimly.

"It seemed to die down," Brenda went on, "and there was silence. And then I heard men tramping about. Of course, I thought it was the police, and Terry, come to rescue me. I tried to call out, but I couldn't make a sound through the gag. I was desperately afraid they'd go again without finding me."

"Just my feeling," I interrupted, "when I heard it all from down below."

"You heard it?" she asked in surprise.

I nodded.

"I'll tell you my bit later," I said. "Go on."

"Well," she continued, "I listened, and I could hear them tramping about, and I heard a voice saying 'Can't you find it? It must be here somewhere. They had it. You heard them say they had it. It's got to be found.' And then the tramping began again. I knew, then, Uncle Jack, that it wasn't the police, or any rescue party. You see, I recognised the voice that spoke—a rather high, squeaky voice; it was that lawyer who came to Trewwerry that night."

"Kesteven?" I exclaimed. "Are you certain?"

"Quite," she said.

"It's quite O.K., skipper," Terry cut in. "It's a fact. It's difficult for you to understand, but I'll explain later."

"Go on, Kitten," I said.

"There isn't much more," she said. "When I recognised that voice, of course I lay still. The noise of searching went on, and at last a voice said 'Here y'are, guv'nor,' and the lawyer said 'Good.' Of course, Uncle Jack, I didn't know then—I don't know yet—how you got the papers up to the top, and how those men took them from you, but it was quite plain to me that, somehow, that was what had happened. And then I heard them going away. Uncle Jack, I was furious, then. I'd left off being frightened some time before. I'd gone passive, indifferent. Now, at the thought of that man going off with the papers that we'd all gone through so much for—that you, I believed, had died for, I went crazy. I wriggled and struggled and fought to get free, but I couldn't.

"And then a voice shouted 'Hands up!' and there was another rushing sound. For an instant there was silence, and then the fighting broke out again—more shouts and blows and shots. And presently through it I heard Terry's voice calling my name. I tried to answer, but I couldn't make a sound. I had to lie there, and a bullet came through the wall of the shed, passed just over my head, and zipped into the ground. I lay very still then. And then the door crashed open, and a blinding white light flashed on me—and then Terry was beside me, cutting the cords. And"—she made a little gesture—"and that's all my part of the story. Terry will tell you the rest."

Rattigan shrugged his shoulders.

"She's left me to tell the real juicy bit," he said. "But I think we must have your yarn first, skipper. It really comes next—and I want to save mine till the end."

Brenda squeezed my hands.

"Are you sure you're strong enough to tell it now, Uncle Jack," she asked anxiously.

"Strong?" I said scornfully. "I'm strong enough to recite the *Iliad* backwards—if I could remember it! If I can have another drink of that super-barley-water——"

They nearly fell over each other in an attempt to be first to fill the glass and give it to me.

XLII

SO then I told them my story, and, as I went on, I saw Brenda's eyes fill with tears again as they went on staring steadily into mine, and at last she laid her other hand on mine and stroked it gently, and Terry got up and walked about the room, clenching his fists and saying "poor old badger" and "damned swine" alternately under his breath. When I told them about finding the Alsatian on the ledge of rock, Brenda gave a little cry, and said "Oh, poor Aunt Hattie," and Terry stared and glared and growled "damned swine" again.

"Holy smoke!" he said when I had finished. "You're a marvel, skipper. Any

ordinary human man would have been dead or crazy before he'd have got half way through all that."

"I'd have been dead, Ratty," I told him, "if you hadn't shinned down that rope after me. I'll never forget that."

"Shut up," he said. "I'd not have left your old carcass down there to rot, let alone given you up for dead before I'd made sure. I'm only sorry I was so long about it, but I had to go for another rope."

"And after all," I said, "it's all been for nothing. They've got the papers. I tried to hold them, Kitten, but I couldn't; they got them away from me and pitched me down the hole again——"

Brenda patted my hand.

"You did wonders, Uncle Jack, more than I had a right to expect from any man—even from you. But—just hear Terry's tale."

"I want to," I said. "What happened to you, Ratty?"

Rattigan sat down on the bed again and scratched his red bullet head.

"Well now," he said, "'twas like this. After you and Brenda went over the top, Miss Winterton and I made for the car. Those blackguards began a bit of a rush to stop us, but when I let off another round or two they checked and hung back a bit, and we got through. Carne had started up the engine and was standing by with the door open. The mob came after us again, but we beat them by lengths—and then had to push through some more who were round the car,

arguing with the constable. I pushed Aunt Hattie aboard—she was asking a lot of questions about Brenda, but I couldn't stop to answer 'em. I was busy pushing people's faces in, and Carne had got his truncheon out and was cracking skulls like it was a fair. At last we got aboard and under way. One of our friends tried to push us back with his hands—and I'd say there are ruts in him where the wheels went over him. And then we were off. They opened fire on us at last, and punctured the glass—I was thankful it was safety glass—but they didn't hit the tyres, and we got away.

"Well, that was that, and I'd not meant to stop till we got to Redruth, but a bit along the road the near rear tyre went off like a howitzer. At the pace I was going, 'twas lucky I had a good grip of the wheel, for we skidded broadside on, hit both banks in turn, and finished up rear rank in front, so to speak.

"Well, I jumped down to change the wheel, and trod on broken bottles. 'Twas a miracle the stuff hadn't ripped all our tyres to ribbons, instead of just the one. Well, the policeman and I were bent over the toolbox getting out the jack with one hand and comforting Aunt Hattie with the other, so to speak, when"—Terry gulped and went the colour of a beetroot—"I found I'd run into another blasted trap. It hadn't occurred to me, you know. I'd thought all our friends were concentrated in the massed attack on the house. Anyway, some brute put the

muzzle of a revolver against the nape of my neck and told me that if I moved he'd blow my head off. Another one did the same to the constable, and the road, so far as I could see in the fog, was stiff with more of the blackguards.

"And then who should stroll up but our friend Kesteven, spats and all, as cool as a John Collins.

" 'Good-evening, Mr. Rattigan,' says he. 'May I trouble you for those papers?'

" 'You may not, Mr. Kesteven,' says I, 'because I haven't them.'

" 'Then may I ask,' says he, as polite as be-damned, 'who has them?'

" 'You may ask,' I says, 'but I can't tell you, because I don't know. 'Tis possible that your shock troops, who are busy pulling down the house, may have found them by this.'

" 'You'll forgive me,' says he, 'if I insist upon satisfying myself as to the truth of your statements. Will you kindly step to the side of the road?'

"So Carne and I stood there, with the revolver muzzles digging into our cervicle vertebræ, and Mister Ruddy Kesteven opened the door and politely asked the rest of the party to step this way. Of course, there was nobody in the back of the car but Aunt Hattie, and do you think she stepped out? She did not. She sat where she was and told Kesteven exactly what she thought of him, and most of it was enough to take the hide off a bullock.

“ ‘Why,’ says he, plainly taken aback, ‘where are Captain Carmichael and Miss Lorimer?’ ”

“ ‘Mind your own business,’ says Aunt Hattie. ‘If we had a real London policeman here I’d have you arrested—and I will yet. What have you done with my boys, you brutal scoundrel?’ ”

“ ‘Twas plain that Kesteven didn’t know what she was talking about—but ’twas also plain that he was getting rattled, and had some reason for not wanting to waste time. ”

“ ‘Since I can’t get any satisfactory replies from any of you,’ he says, not so polite as before, ‘I shall be under the painful necessity of searching you.’ ”

“ Which he did, the blackguard, and the car too, and in the end he had to admit that I was right, and that we hadn’t the papers about us. ”

“ ‘But,’ says he, and there was a nasty note in his voice, ‘I’m convinced that you wouldn’t come away without them. I insist upon knowing where Carmichael and Miss Lorimer are. I give you two minutes to tell me: if you refuse—I’m desperate now, Rattigan, and I shan’t have the faintest scruple in shooting the lot of you.’ ”

“ ‘Kesteven,’ says I, ‘you’re bluffing, and you know it. You’ve not the guts to shoot a tomtit on a twig. If it wasn’t that I’m in a hurry, I’d enjoy sitting here all night calling your bluff, but Miss Winterton has a train to catch, and I suppose you’ll keep on getting in our way till I tell you what you want to know. So I’ll tell you what your

own commonsense ought to have told you before—that Carmichael and Miss Lorimer have gone another way, on foot, across country. Just where they are now, I'm not able to tell you, for the Lord knows how fast or far they'll travel in this mist.'

"Well, he thought that over, and 'twas plain that he saw it must be true. And it rattled him badly. He yapped something to his men, and the lot of them just melted away into the mist. I guess he thought you had the papers on you, and that he'd have to be mighty nippy to catch you.

"Well, we wasted no time. Carne and I jacked up the car, changed the wheel, got aboard, and greased up that sinful road, fog or no fog, like bats out of hell. When we struck the main road I opened her right out, and Redruth just jumped straight at us.

"I wanted to park Aunt Hattie at a hotel, but the old sportsman wouldn't hear of it. Her one desire in life was to call out the entire Cornish constabulary and set them to arresting Kesteven for stealing her lap-dogs. So we made straight for the police-station. Carne and I barged straight in, and who do you think we found?"

I shook my head. I had no idea.

"Your inspector friend from town," Terry said.

"What, Jervis?" I asked incredulously.

"The same. 'Hello, inspector,' says I, 'what brings you down here? Surely you're not thinking there's a case in this business after all?'

"He looked at me as if he'd like to turn me into Carrara marble.

" 'From information received,' says he, 'I've come to the conclusion that there is something going on down here that is worth investigating. And since the affair started in my division, I've come personally——'

" 'There is,' says I. 'There's a case of dog-robbery. Come out and be introduced to Miss Winterton, and she'll tell you all about it. So you've been keeping an eye on us, have you?'

" 'I've been keeping in touch,' he admits. 'Where's Captain Carmichael?'

" 'I don't know,' says I, 'and I'd very much like to. He and Miss Lorimer are loose on the hills'—I wasn't going to tell him just what you were after, you see, skipper—and a couple of thousand of the dirtiest blackguards in England are hunting for them. So I want all the men you can parade to come and find them.'

" 'If you'll explain what's happened——' he began.

" 'There's not enough time,' I told him. 'I'll tell you as we go along. But I'll tell you this—the house was attacked to-night, with gas, and there are more revolvers to the square inch in this district to-night than in all Chicago.'

" That woke him up. He turned to the sergeant and asked for men, and cars, and I must say the sergeant jumped to it. Before I'd had time to say much to Jervis, two cars were panting at the kerb, and policemen

were rallying in masses. We had at least ten of them, and I gathered that the sergeant was ringing up other stations for more.

"I took the inspector and Carne aboard our car—with Aunt Hattie; the old lady'd not be left behind—and as we went along I gave him an account of what had happened. By this time, skipper, I'd begun to feel really anxious about you and Brenda, since Kesteven was hunting for you, and might possibly guess where you'd gone. Whatever the papers were, they weren't worth your being scuppered for. So I made a clean breast of it, and told him you'd gone to the mine.

"So then I slowed down and asked Carne, who was in the back, if he knew of a road that ran nearer to the mine than Trewerry, and he said yes, there was one that ran within half a mile. So we made for that.

"Well, the mist kept clearing a bit, and then thickening again, and being on a strange road I had to go miles slower than I'd have liked. But presently Carne leans out of the window and says that a bit further on there's a track that leads to the mine. So I slowed down to look for it, and 'twas lucky I did, for I only jammed the brakes on in time to avoid crashing into a car that was standing, with its lights off, in that lane.

"We all tumbled out and had a look at it, and the inspector wrote down its number—'twas a London number—in his notebook, but there was no sign of whom it belonged to, nor what it was doing there.

" 'Well,' says the inspector, 'we'd better

push on to the mine. I'll leave a man here to look after this car. If it's anything to do with these fellows, we'll have to cut off their retreat.' Then he says, 'No, I won't. If there are as many of them as you say, Mr. Rattigan, I shall want every man I've got—and if I left one alone, and the whole mob came down on him, he could do no good. If we could put this car out of action——'

" 'Why,' says I, 'that's easy. Take his plugs. But make sure he's no spares.'

"So I took the plugs out of his engine and put them in my pocket while Carne rummaged in the toolbox to make sure there were no spares.

" 'But,' says I, 'if you're going to leave the other cars unguarded, we'd better immobilise them, too. We'd look pretty small if the enemy came down and collared our cars while we were away.'

"We moved our cars a bit down the road, out of sight, and the policemen took their plugs, too, and we prepared to start for the mine. Carne was hunting for the track. And then another question came up—what were we going to do with Aunt Hattie? I didn't want to drag the poor old lady into a scrap, yet I didn't think she'd consent to be left behind. However, she settled that for herself, because when I went to the car to ask her what she'd like to do, I found she was fast asleep; tired out, poor old dame; done up—and no wonder.

"So we left her there, and started to look for the track. And then, from up the hill

before us, we heard the noises of the father and mother of a scrap beginning—shouts, and shots, and a whole rumpus.”

XLIII

“OF course, we’d not to worry much about the track, then. We just charged straight up the hill, over the grass, in the direction of the row—though ’tis extraordinary how deceptive sound is in a fog. But, long before we were getting near the top, the rumpus died away, and we were left pawing our way through the fog in silence, hoping we were keeping direction, but mighty uncertain, bearing this way and that.

“As it happened we were, for in a little while we saw the shape of the mine buildings, and then, a moment after, the dark figures of men looming down on us. Seen through the mist, and being up above us, they looked gigantic, and we could not see how many of them there were, but the inspector didn’t hesitate. He whipped out a revolver, jumped forward, and shouted :

“ ‘Hands up, the lot of you !’

“The mob stopped for an instant, and there was a kind of mutter of surprise, and the next instant there was a flash and a bang, and a bullet whistled unpleasantly close to my ear. And then the lot of them came charging down on us.

“I flashed my torch in their faces to dazzle

them, pulled out my revolver and let fly a couple of rounds into the brown, but whether I hit anything or not I can't say. Some of the other fellows opened up, and there was quite a lot of lead flying about loose, but it was wild shooting in the dark. Anyway, the shooting only lasted a second or two, for then they were right on top of us, and it was a hand-to-hand business.

" 'Twas the most muddled fight I was ever in. I think the police ought to pass a hearty vote of thanks to the fellow who invented their helmets. They could recognise each other by them, d'you see, there was no other way of telling friend from enemy. I know that so far as I was concerned, when I saw a head with a helmet on I let it go by, but any other head I hit, hard. I wasn't so lucky myself, twice I got nearly knocked out by a ham-fisted Cornish bobby.

" Well, after a bit 'twas plain that our friends were principally anxious to get away, if we'd let them, and we each made for a shadowy figure and fought it for as long as it would fight, and then, if it ran, chased it till we dropped it. One fellow held me off a bit by firing at me—he completely spoiled my hat with one shot—but I managed to tackle him low and bring him down, and then I hammered his head on a rock till I thought he'd lie quiet for a bit. I parked him up against the wall of a shed, where I'd know where to find him, and, seeing that our side had the situation well in hand, I went to look for you two.

"The mist had cleared a bit by then, and I flashed my torch round me as I went, so I could see fairly well—and the scene round the mouth of that mine, skipper—well, 'twas like a young battlefield. There seemed to be men lying about all over the place; some of them were groaning, and some were just beginning to sit up and take notice, and some of them didn't move, and there was still a smell of cordite in the air, and blood.

"Well, I went prowling about, flashing my torch at every figure I saw, dreading it might be you or Brenda, but I could find no sign of either of you. And then I thought maybe you might be locked in one of the sheds, so I burst open the doors of one or two, and found them empty, and then I tried a third, and there inside I found Brenda, lying on the floor trussed like a chicken."

Brenda drew a deep breath and looked at him with brimming eyes.

"Thank God you came, Terry," she said. "A few minutes more, and I think I should have gone off my head."

"Not you," said Rattigan. "Still, I'm glad I found you when I did; 'twas a blessed relief to me." He turned to me again. "Well, skipper, the first thing the little lady said was that you were down the mine, and she was afraid you were dead, but I was to go down and look for you, at once. Of course, I said I'd find you, dead or alive, but I'd got to free her first, so I cut her lashings, and made her as comfortable as I could—she was mighty stiff and worn out, poor little

lady. Meanwhile she told me what had happened. And then I went out of the shed again.

"And there I found that the mist had cleared yet a bit more, and the inspector and his men were busy collecting prisoners and casualties and sorting them out.

" 'What we want,' I heard him say, 'is about a dozen ambulances. I suppose you've got one at Redruth, sergeant? Right. Send one of your men who can drive a car to fetch it. Tell him to bring the car back as well; we'll need it. Just a minute, make sure he's got the plugs before he starts.'

"I buttonholed him and told him that I'd found Brenda, but that you were down the mine.

" 'H'm,' says he. 'If you and Captain Carmichael and the young lady had left this business alone, you wouldn't be in this mess now.'

" 'H'm,' says I. 'If we'd left it alone, inspector, you wouldn't be here now, arresting more people at a time than you've ever done in your life. Have any of your men a rope with them, now?'

" 'A rope?' says he. 'No. We didn't bring any rope. What the devil do you want a rope for?'

" 'To go down the mine,' says I. 'The blackguards cut the rope Carmichael went down on, and threw it down the shaft.'

" 'Then he's dead,' says he.

" 'Dead or alive,' says I, 'I'm going to get him out. Will you tell me where I can get a rope?'

"Carne speaks up then, from somewhere in the darkness.

" 'I haven't seen a rope here anywhere, sir,' he says, 'but they're sure to have some at Trethewey Farm. 'Tis only a mile further along the road from where we stopped.'

" 'Right,' says I, 'I'll go and fetch it. Keep an eye on the lady, one of you.'

"And off I went down the hill.

"Now, 'tis queer how things happen sometimes. We none of us knew the way too well, and couldn't be sure of hitting the road just where the cars were. The policeman who went for the ambulance landed behind the three cars, and he naturally took the rearmost one. I struck the road ahead of them all, beat back, and of course came first on the strange car we'd found and put out of action. I still had its plugs in my pocket, so naturally I fitted them and went off in that car, without looking at the others. There's a reason for my telling you this, as you'll see in a minute.

"Well, I went flying along the road. I went so fast in the darkness I overshot the farm and went on to the next. I knocked up the farmer, and when I'd made him understand what 'twas all about, he was not only ready to lend me all the rope he had, but keen to come along and lend a hand. It took him about ten weeks to get dressed and find the rope, but he was ready at last, and back we went.

"When we got back to the convoy, the ambulance had arrived; it was parked in the

rear. And as we went up the hill we met four policemen coming down with a couple of stretchers—and they weren't empty stretchers. Up at the mine I found the inspector detailing policemen to help a bunch of walking wounded, so to speak, down to the cars.

" 'Have you rounded up the lot, do you think, inspector?' says I.

" 'Can't say,' says he. 'Have you got your rope, Mr. Rattigan?'

" 'I have,' says I. 'I'd not have come back without it. And I'm going to get Captain Carmichael up. Will you leave us our car, inspector, to take him and the little lady away in?'

" 'Yes,' says he. 'Our cars will be going to and fro a bit yet. There'll be two or three men left here who'll give you a hand if you need it. I'm going with this party, but I'll come back when I've got them in the cells.'

" With that he went off down the hill.

" I went to the shed where I'd left Brenda, and found that the inspector had rounded up all the prisoners into it. I couldn't see them in the darkness, but I could hear them breathing, and moving, and every now and again one of them would groan. There didn't seem to be one of them that was fit for much; the scrapping must have been mighty earnest. There was a policeman at the door, and I asked him after Brenda. He said she was at the top of the shaft.

" 'There's a man with her, sir,' he says.

'I was mortal afraid she'd throw herself down the shaft or summat, so he's keeping an eye on she.'

"So to the pit I went, and there was the little lady, sitting closer to the edge than I liked, looking as if nothing in the world mattered. She brightened up a bit when she saw me with the rope, though I know she'd given up hope about you, really.

"Well, there isn't much to say about getting you out. My farmer and I shinned up the framework of the winding gear and made the rope fast, as you had done, and down I went and found you, and brought you out. You know all about that.

"It was after this that the queer thing happened. We managed to pull you round a bit, skipper, but you went off again, and 'twas plain the thing to do was to get you into a hospital or somewhere as quick as we could. We took one of the shed doors off its hinges, humped you on to it, and my farmer friend and I carted you down to the road, with Brenda leading the way. I'd got to know the track by this time, and the mist had pretty nearly cleared, so we made straight for our own car. And just as we were getting you down the bank into the road, I trod on something soft that mighty nearly sent me sprawling. As soon as we'd set your stretcher down on the road I flashed my torch on the man—I knew 'twas a man by the feel of it. And who d'you think it was, skipper?"

I shook my head; I could not guess.

"Kesteven!" Terry cried triumphantly. "Our legal friend Kesteven, spats and all."

This was a surprise for me. I started up.

"Dead?" I asked.

Terry shook his head.

"Not at all. But he was unconscious, and examining him I found he had a lump at the back of his head the size of an ostrich's egg. Somebody had swiped him a good 'un."

"Well, of course, we didn't want to be bothered with him; all we could think about was getting you into the doctor's hands. So I asked the farmer to mount guard over the blighter and hand him over to the inspector when he got back, and then we picked you up again and carried you to the car."

"And there was another surprise, for there, sitting in the open doorway of the car, with her feet on the running board and her head against the door frame, was Aunt Hattie, whom I'd left snugly asleep in the corner. She was asleep still—or, rather, again. We had to wake her up to get you in, and when we'd made you comfy we tucked her beside you. Brenda perched herself on one of the folding seats, and I got into the driving seat, and off we went."

"I let her out as much as I thought was safe—I doubt if I touched sixty anywhere—and presently we passed the inspector's convoy coming back. I missed his car by, I think, about three inches."

"Well, we got to Redruth and made for the police-station, where they told us of a

nursing home. So we went there and knocked them up, and they said they'd take you in, and I went upstairs, and saw you put to bed all snug. They wanted to bath you first—and I'll admit you were certainly a mess—but I wouldn't have it.

"Well, the next thing was to find quarters for Brenda and Aunt Hattie, and down I went to the car again to tootle them round to the best hotel. But when I got to the car Brenda took me by the arm most mysteriously, and drew me into the back, saying that Aunt Hattie had something to say to me.

"And she had, by George! 'Twas the surprise of my young life. It appears that after we'd gone up the hill and rounded up the prisoners, Aunt Hattie—who'd had quite a nice little snooze—woke up. For a few seconds she didn't know where she was, or why, but then she began to remember. She started to curse herself for going to sleep, poor old dame, when Brenda might be murdered somewhere. And the next thing she realised was that somebody had the bonnet of the car up and seemed to be tinkering with the engine. She had a good look at what she could see of the fellow, and grasped that it wasn't me, or a policeman. She says that once she grasped that fact she became very wide awake. She was not going to have any strange man driving her off across Cornwall in a car. So she decided that she'd get out, very quietly, and sneak off.

"The door of the car was still half open, and she slipped out without making a sound.

She took another look at the man—and recognised him.

“Now whether Kesteven had anything to do with what happened to the old lady’s hounds I can’t say, but she’s firmly convinced that he strangled them, one by one, with his own hands. At the sight of him, she says, she boiled up. When we took the spare plugs away, we left the toolbox open, and things scattered about a bit. Aunt Hattie got her hands on to a good hefty tyre-lever, crept up behind Mister Kesteven, and socked him an imperial zonk on the back of the neck. He spun round about seven times, she says, and then pitched into the grass at the foot of the bank, and there she left him—and serve him right, she says.

“Well, she had some idea of coming to find us, but she didn’t know which way we’d gone or where we were. She’s a practical old girl, you know, and she decided that if she started to wander about the place in the dark she’d most likely miss us and make a muddle of everything, so she sat down in the doorway to wait for us, and then she fell asleep again.

“Well, the jewel of this part of the story is that when Kesteven received the k.o. from the business end of the tyre-lever, he dropped something that I suppose had been tucked under his arm, something that clattered a bit as it fell. She picked it up, and found that it was a flat tin box.”

I nearly jumped out of bed.

“Good Lord, Terry!” I gasped. “The

papers! What have you done with them?"

He grinned at me.

"Keep cool," he said, "they're all safe. It seems that Aunt Hattie didn't altogether trust either you, skipper, or me, and she said not a word about her find till we were in the nursing home, and she and Brenda were alone in the car. Then she told the yarn, and handed over the box.

"Well, we decided we'd best make sure of things then and there, where there could be no eavesdroppers. The box was locked, but the lid didn't take much forcing, and we soon had it open. It had a few papers in—not a lot—and when we'd had a look at them—well, most of them were a bit above my mental grasp, skipper, but I realised they were pretty important."

"What did you do with them?" I demanded anxiously.

"Easy on," Terry said coolly. "I asked Brenda if she'd trust 'em with me, and she said, bless her, she would. I reckoned, you see, that just in case of possible trouble they'd be safer with me. So I parked her and Auntie at a hotel, and then I did a little bit o' work that I think was fairly brainy in the way of laying a false trail, so to speak. I drove back to the mine to see if I could give the inspector a hand. I took another road there, and in a nice quiet spot in a hollow I took the box and slung it over the wall. And then I doubled back. If anyone starts combing the hillside for the box, skipper, it'll take 'em some time to find it, and when

they do, they'll start hunting on a cold trail in a direction that, going by the map, leads straight for the broad Atlantic, and nowhere else."

"Good work!" I said approvingly. "But the papers, Terry! What have you done with them? Where are they?"

His face split in his wide grin.

"Why," he drawled, "they're here in my inside pocket. If you like, you can have a look at them now."

And he fished a handful of folded documents out of his pocket and spread them on the bed.

Together we went through the papers, and as I examined them I realised their importance; I understood why Lorimer, delicate, timid little student, but a real patriot, had taken appalling risks, dared the deadliest things, to try to prevent their getting into the wrong hands. For the papers proved conclusively that Mr. James Faulkner, who, as I had read in the newspaper that evening at the club, was in charge of the international financial negotiations, in whose hands the honour and financial safety of Britain lay, was not the honest and upright man everyone had believed: that he was a swindler and a forger and a thief. They showed that even when these papers were written, three years before, he had anticipated his appointment to the chair of that negotiating committee, and deliberately planned to feather his own nest and to sell his country into the hands of her commercial rivals, crippling her for decades.

I looked up at Brenda.

"Kitten," I said, "we ought to thank God for your Aunt Hattie. She didn't know it at the time, but she's done wonderful work. If those blackguards had got hold of these papers—well, I suppose they'd have blackmailed this fellow Faulkner, and he'd have paid up, and stuck to this job of his—a man who ought to be doing twenty years in Portland. And if some chuckle-headed policeman had found them, and some cheap newspaper man had got a peep at them, there'd have been a scandal that would have made the name of Britain mud in the eyes of the world—and at a time when we can least afford such a thing."

She nodded.

"We've done the right thing, then, Uncle Jack?"

"We certainly have."

"And what are we to do now?"

I shook my head, staring down at the papers.

"I really don't know. We'll have to talk it over; think out a plan. It's a delicate business, and it's got to be handled delicately. I don't think we can do anything till I'm allowed to get up. In the meantime, I wish I knew what Kesteven had to do with it, and who his gang of roughnecks are, and—oh, all about it."

"I don't know," Terry confessed, "though I believe I'm beginning to see a faint glimmer of daylight. I've tried to pump the inspector, but an oyster is garrulous compared with him."

But he wants to see you, as soon as you're better, and maybe he'll tell you more than he will me. I expect he'll be round in the morning."

"Right," I said. "I'll be ready for him."

"Good," said Rattigan. He began to gather up the papers. "In the meantime, in case there's still somebody at large who might have a stab at recovering these little notes, I'm going to stow them back in my pocket."

"You're sure they'll be safe?" I asked him anxiously.

He grinned.

"It's the safest place I can think of, for the moment. Mind you, I don't think there is anybody left who'll try to take them from me, but if there is—well, after the traps I've walked into lately, it'll take a clever fellow, backed up by an army of giants, to get 'em."

There came a knock at the door: it opened, admitting the nurse's head. Terry crammed the papers into his pocket.

"You've talked to the patient far too long," she said sternly.

"It's all right, nurse," I said. "What they've talked about has done me more good than all the doctors alive."

She smiled.

"Well, they must go now," she said.

They went, hurriedly; such authority is invested in a nurse's cap. Terry gripped my hand, then remembered its condition and dropped it like a hot coal. Brenda bent over

me, and her lips touched my forehead, light as the brush of a butterfly's wing.

"Good-night, Uncle Jack," she whispered. "Sleep well, and get better quickly. We'll see you to-morrow."

I watched them go out of the room together and then dropped back on my pillow. The conversation had tired me more than I had realised; in five seconds I was fast asleep.

XLIV

I HAD barely finished breakfast next morning—such a breakfast as I had not taken for years—when a message came up that Inspector Jervis was asking to see me.

He came into the room, exuding his usual aura of keen-eyed competence and concealed menace.

"'Morning, sir," he said briskly. "How're you getting on?"

I assured him that I was better, and invited him to sit down. He disposed himself carefully on a chair by the bedside and eyed me appraisingly.

"I'm going to ask you, sir, to make a statement," he said. "I want all the information I can get about this case, and I'll be glad if you'll tell me all you know. Of course, you can refuse, but you'll be called as a witness—if necessary you'll be subpœnaed—and once

in the box I don't think you'll find it easy to keep anything back."

His manner, his gratuitous threats, irritated me as much as usual—perhaps more.

"I haven't said I want to keep anything back, inspector," I said sharply. "But I do expect a square deal. I'm still a good deal in the dark about the whole business, and it would probably help me with my statement if you told me what your case is."

His moustache lifted in a dry smile, and he lugged his notebook out of his pocket.

"I'll have your statement first, sir," he said. "Then I'll tell you what I know—and if in the light of that information you can think of anything else to say, why, you can add it to your statement."

Much as I disliked the man, I could not help smiling at his stubborn insistence. A very hard nut to crack, Inspector Jervis.

So I settled down to tell him my own personal experiences in the affair, right up to the moment when Terry and his helpers hauled me out of the mine shaft. There I stopped; after all, anything that Terry had told me the previous night was only hearsay, so far as I was concerned.

The inspector wrote it all down, slowly and carefully. When I finished, he looked up at me, and his eyes were more gimlety than ever.

"That all, sir?" he challenged sharply.

"All my personal experience," I countered. "I've been in bed ever since, inspector—asleep, most of the time."

He nodded slowly.

"And all this time," he said, "you had no

idea what these mysterious papers were? "

"None," I said promptly.

He tapped his teeth with his pencil reflectively.

"I'd like to find out," he said; "I'd give a lot to know."

"Does that affect your case?" I asked him.

His eyebrows went up and he stared at me for a moment. Then his lips twisted again in that dry smile.

"I can't say. It might."

"Well, what is your case, inspector? You promised to tell me. Let's have the whole yarn."

He seemed to reflect for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "I think—Captain Carmichael, I don't accuse you of keeping anything back, but I think that if I tell you the story, as I see it, it may affect you sufficiently to make you—well, amplify your statement a bit. I want you to understand, sir, that—well, candidly, that the police case has some big gaps in it, and I want every scrap of evidence I can get to strengthen it. And I believe you're the only man alive who can give me that evidence."

"I doubt if I can add a word to what I've said," I told him, "but carry on."

He sat back in his chair and turned back the pages of his notebook to another place.

"You must understand," he said, "that this isn't a record of actual evidence. It's my theory of what happened, and a good deal of it is guesswork—though I don't think my guesses are far out. But proving them right is another thing.

“ Well, to go right back to the beginning. You know, I suppose, that Mr. Cecil Lorimer had a brother-in-law, Andrew Tresilian? He was a bit of a rolling stone, I understand; knocked about the world prospecting for gold and stuff. Well, a little over three years ago he came home—had enough of wandering, I suppose—and somehow or other, I don’t know how, got a job with the Inter-Imperial Finance Company.” I started: the Inter-Imperial Finance Company, according to those documents we had found, had been one of Faulkner’s swindles.

“ He hadn’t been there three months,” the inspector continued, “ when he was arrested for embezzling some money that happened to be in his charge. I’ve looked up the records of his trial. He pleaded not guilty; protested his innocence fiercely; swore the whole business was a frame-up arranged by somebody higher up in the office. In confidence, sir, I don’t mind admitting that in my view the case for the prosecution was weak, but the jury brought him in guilty, and he got three years. To be fair to the man, it strikes me as a heavy sentence in the circumstances, but the judge who tried him wasn’t one to let a man down lightly.

“ Well, the next bit is pure guesswork, but my theory is that, at that time, Tresilian was already in possession of some papers that were valuable—or potentially valuable—and which he’d hidden. And while he was in gaol—at Dartmoor it was—he made the mistake of speaking about them. Well, there were

two men serving sentences there at the time—Banstead and Vannion—two hard cases well known to us; clever scoundrels whom we'd had a hard job to land. My theory is that they're the men who overheard what Tresilian said about the papers. At any rate, the night after Tresilian left Dartmoor, after serving his time, those two broke prison and got clean away. How they did it I don't know—mighty few convicts get far away from Dartmoor—but the facts point to help both outside *and* inside the prison; these things are rare, but they *do* happen.

"Well from what you've told me, and other bits of information I collected, I reckon that when he left Dartmoor, Tresilian went to wherever he'd hidden those papers, and recovered them. I think Banstead and Vannion went after him, and that he saw them tracking him and, not knowing which way to turn or what to do, he decided to go down to Cornwall and put the papers in his brother-in-law's charge. We know that he did this, and went away—and a few days later he was found dead in a field; he'd been lying there some time."

"Murdered," I said.

The inspector shook his head.

"That we can never say, sir. You think so: I think so. I reckon those fellows lost his trail a bit and didn't pick it up again till after he'd left his brother-in-law's place. They found Tresilian and, not knowing that he no longer had the papers on him, they killed him."

"How?" I challenged.

"I don't know, sir, though I've a theory. But, mind you, if that was a murder it can never be proved. The coroner's jury brought in 'death from natural causes,' and officially that's a true verdict. Whatever we may think, we can never prove that it was a murder at all, or that Banstead, or Vannion, or anybody else did it."

I appreciated that.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well," he went on, "now we come to Mr. Cecil Lorimer. He took charge of the papers from his brother-in-law and he hid them—up in that deserted mine. I think that it took Banstead and Vannion some time to trace Tresilian's movements back to Lorimer's house, or most certainly they'd have raided it before he left for London. My theory is that it was only as he was going that they found out that he was the brother-in-law of the man who'd had the papers. They guessed that he was taking them up to town with him—they didn't know that their guess was wrong.

"Now here *I* have to do a bit of guessing. Whether they followed Mr. Lorimer up to London, or whether they got into touch with some confederates in town and put them on his trail while they stayed behind to search the house down here, I don't know. For some reasons I think one; for others, the other. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. From the moment Mr. Lorimer got out of the train at Paddington he was tailed: they

followed him to the hotel where he stayed, they followed him to Gardens Mansions, and back again to the pub where he went, and back to the Mansions again. And he knew it; there's no doubt of that. He knew, as he climbed up the stairs to your flat, that they were close behind him."

"Just a moment," I interrupted, "if you don't know *who* was behind him, you won't be able to arrest the actual murderer."

"We shall never be able to do that, sir, because Mr. Lorimer wasn't murdered. Don't you see that if he had been, he'd never have had time to write that note? No, his was death from natural causes, as the jury said. According to the medical evidence, he was a delicate man; his heart was groggy. All the strain of having those papers in his possession, and knowing that tough crooks who would stick at nothing were after them, must have told on him. And the mere physical effort of going to that mine in the dark alone and lowering himself down the shaft to hide the papers—he must have had to screw himself up to do that. And those stairs up to your flat were the last straw, as you might say. Halfway up, his heart just gave out, and he collapsed.

"I see, in my mind's eye, those toughs somewhere further down the staircase, following him, looking for a chance to pounce on him, lay him out, and take the papers, but not seeing a chance to do it and get away safely. They weren't risking their necks, you understand, if they could help it, and they couldn't carry

out, on that staircase, what I believe was their favourite method.

"Well, they heard him collapse ; they went up after him ; they found him just finishing his note to you, and they tried to take it out of his hands. But he clutched it, tight, and then they heard your taximan coming down. They tried to snatch the paper out of his hand and it tore, and they went away with only half of it—a half that was no use to them without the other piece."

He paused for a moment to consult his notebook.

"Well," he continued, "there they were, with nothing but half a message that told them nothing. The obvious thing was to get the other half, and it was equally obvious that you had it, there in your flat. Now this is where they were clever : neither Banstead nor Vannion nor their confederates, if there were any, who shadowed Mr. Lorimer, were fitted for the job, so they hired Monkey Ted to break into your flat and try to get the papers. He was just the man for the job, because if his get-away by the door was cut off, he could shin down the rainpipe, as he did.

"Well, we got Monkey Ted, but we got nothing out of him. All he would tell us was that he was hired by a man named Curly to pinch some papers from your flat. He didn't know what the papers were, or why Curly wanted them. Curly hired him to do the job, gave him a quid and promised him four more. That's all he would say, and I'm satisfied that it's all he knew.

"Well, we knew Curly all right, and we started to look for him. He wasn't in any of his usual haunts; he was missing all that day; we couldn't pick up a trace of him till you rang me up that night, and we found Curly dead on the stairs. And there was our real line of enquiry gone west."

"But who killed Curly?" I asked. "And why?"

The inspector shook his head again.

"I don't know," he confessed. "If Curly had taken the torn message from you, I'd have said that one of the others took it from him, and then killed him to keep his mouth shut. But he hadn't got the paper, so that theory won't hold water: they wouldn't have run the risk of laying him out first and searching him after. It's only lately that I've understood that somebody else, somebody who had nothing to do with Banstead and Co., might have done—or, more likely, instigated—it, but we don't know whose hand did it. I don't suppose we'll ever find out, and if we did I doubt if we'd get a conviction, for there's nothing, absolutely nothing, to suggest that that death wasn't a pure accident; that Curly did not, as it appeared, fall off the banisters and crack his skull against the steps."

"Our friends," I said, "seem pretty ingenious in their methods of homicide."

The inspector nodded.

"They were, sir. Mind you, I don't want you to get the idea of an elaborate criminal society presided over by a master mind—the sort of thing you read about in detective novels.

I won't say such things don't exist, but I never came up against one of them. But certainly Banstead and Vannion, who had a very wide circle of acquaintances among the criminal classes, gathered something in the nature of a gang. And they did it cleverly. Most of the gang, so far as I can make out, were simply hired to do a little job here and there; they didn't know what it was all about, or even who their real employers were; one hired another and he hired a third, and so on. None of them, if caught, could give much away."

I remembered Mr. Covey, and silently agreed with the inspector.

"Now, we'll go back a bit," he said. "That next morning, when Miss Lorimer came to see you, one of the gang searched her rooms at the hotel—just in case the papers were there, I imagine. Later in the day, while you were lunching with her, one—possibly the same one—went through your flat again. I have an idea they squared the porter at the flats to keep his eyes shut, but I couldn't get him to admit it. Another one—your friend in the bowler—trailed you and Miss Lorimer. You threw him off the trail very neatly at Paddington, but it seems he came back and picked you up again at the inquest, but you tricked me into side-tracking him for you there."

"Do you admit I was justified, now, inspector?" I asked him.

A suspicion of a twinkle came into his opaque eyes.

"Certainly not, sir. It was most reprehensible to force my hand in that way. But

since it didn't do any harm, I suppose I'll have to forgive you. Well, now, here you begin to see signs of a distinct organization. Whether any of the gang were down here already, or whether they were sent down quickly, I can't say, but it's plain that they guessed you'd be going down to this Trewerry place, and they searched the house, trying with the half of a clue they had to find the papers before you got there. Meanwhile, they set that cart across the road to stop you, and, you say, they had a good shot at kidnapping you then and there.

"Well, they failed to collar you, and they failed to find the papers, and you and your party got to the house. You've probably wondered why they didn't rush you. Well, I've tried to see into their minds—a thing you have to try and do in my job—and I think this is the way they argued. None of 'em wanted to be hanged for murder—and it was a thousand to one that in a scrap with two gentlemen like Mr. Rattigan and yourself someone would have to get killed before you gave away your secret. Anyway, a direct attack didn't suit them. And I reckon they argued that you'd do your best to find the papers and get away as quickly as you could, so they decided to let you do the hunting yourselves, and save them the trouble, and they'd nab you as you tried to get away, and take the papers from you. They settled down into a sort of siege warfare, taking every step they could think of to cut you off from rescue."

"They were quite ingenious about that," I said. "But you're not quite right, inspector.

They had a shot at killing Mr. Rattigan and myself in the laboratory."

He cocked an eye at me shrewdly.

"Now did they, sir? Will you swear to it? From what Mr. Rattigan has told me, it was not till you'd knocked a bottle off the shelf that you noticed that—gas, shall we call it? Isn't it possible that it might have been some chemical Mr. Lorimer had left on the shelf."

"I don't believe it," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't say that I do, sir. I'm as ready as you are to believe that it was a booby trap set for you by the gang—but I haven't a scrap of evidence to prove it, and neither have you."

I had to admit the truth of this.

"But," I argued, "supposing it *was* a booby trap, as we believe—that seems to be against their regular tactics."

"It seems to be," he confessed. "I can only guess that, failing to find the papers in the house, they decided they must be in the laboratory, left you to find them, and set a trap that they expected and hoped would lay you out when you'd found them—another murder that would look like accidental death."

"And that last attack, when they tried to gas us under the front door——"

"They were desperate then, sir; it was their last throw."

"It might have been ours," I said grimly.

He shook his head.

"I doubt it. Not sufficient concentration to use successfully in that broadcast way.

It's a light gas and disperses easily. But you might have been badly doped."

I stared at him.

"What do you mean, inspector? What is this gas they've been using? How did Tresilian die? What is this method of killing so that there's no evidence of murder?"

"Cyanide of potassium," he said curtly. "You know the stuff, I suppose. You use it for killing dogs, and destroying wasps' nests. Know how you destroy wasps' nests? You put a few bits of cyanide in the doorway of the nest, pour water on it, and shut up the doorway. Every wasp dies of asphyxiation. Well, sir, take enough of the stuff, put it in a bucket, pour water on, or better still, nitric acid, and hold a man's head well over it—preferably with a sack over the whole outfit—and he'll be dead in a few minutes. And if, afterwards, he's left in the open air, as Tresilian was, by the time a post-mortem is made,—if it comes to that, but there are no outward symptoms of poison to arouse suspicion—there won't be a trace of poison discoverable in any of the organs. As a matter of fact, I suspected this, and from enquiries I've made, quite a good deal of cyanide has been sold, in small quantities, by chemists all over London—and at a time of the year when there are no wasps to kill."

As I realized the devilish ingenuity of this, I could only gasp, "Good God!"

The inspector sat back, locking his hands.

"You begin to understand, sir, the mentality of these people? They wouldn't stick at

murder to get hold of those papers, but they didn't kill unless it seemed the only way—and they wouldn't risk their necks if they could help it. They'd have got the papers from you without hurting you if they could."

"They heaved me down the mine shaft," I reminded him.

"You knew too much by then to be left alive. And even that—who could have proved that they'd murdered you? What Miss Miss Lorimer overhead from the shed wasn't evidence enough to hang any one of them."

"Yes," I said slowly. "I see." I stared up at him. "Look here, inspector, you've made a lot of clever guesses, and put together a thoroughly convincing theory: I can't see a flaw in it anywhere. But dash it all, man, you've got these fellows under lock and key in your hands. Do you mean to tell me that you haven't got a statement from any one of them that puts you in possession of *facts*?"

His face twisted in a wry grin.

"I've got statements from every one in the cells, but so far as your business is concerned, Captain Carmichael, not one of them tells me a thing that I didn't know, or that helps me. As I've told you, they're merely hirelings—they know precious little about the business as a whole, and they're so scared of the rope that—" he paused grimly—"that no method I know of will persuade them to say a word that implicates themselves; and they're all too scared of each other to turn King's evidence."

"But Banstead and Vannion——" I began.

He eyed me stolidly.

"They're gone where I can't question them," he said. "We found Banstead at the pithead with half his head blown away. Vannion was shot through the stomach. We got him to hospital alive, but he died without saying a word."

"But Kesteven?" I challenged. "You've got him—unless that swipe on the back of the neck killed him, too."

He smiled faintly.

"No," he said. "He's alive all right. But there isn't a particle of evidence against Mr. Kesteven that's worth—that." He snapped his fingers.

I nearly jumped out of bed.

"But, good God, man!" I expostulated. "Kesteven was the head of the whole concern. He—he——"

"Yes, sir? What did he do?"

I hesitated. For the life of me I couldn't say, in so many words, what Kesteven himself had actually done to my certain knowledge—except search Terry Rattigan.

"Exactly," the inspector said. "A technical assault, if Mr. Rattigan cares to take the matter up. You're wrong about Mr. Kesteven; he's nothing to do with the gang."

"But he tried to get the papers——"

"So did you, sir. What you've failed to grasp is that there were three parties of people after those papers—yourselves, the gang, and Mr. Kesteven and his lot. Mr. Kesteven has explained his part in it quite clearly. First of all, as you've told me, he called at your

flat and tried to persuade you to surrender the papers, but you refused—partly because you hadn't got 'em. Somehow—I don't know how—he got wind that the gang were after them, and he knew they were a dangerous crowd. Possibly at the risk of his life, he got through to you at Trewerry, and made another attempt to persuade you, for your own sakes, to drop trying to fight the gang, and to let him run the risk of getting away with the papers. You refused again, and, finding you obstinate, he slipped away—unobtrusively, because he knew the gang would be after him if they spotted him leaving the house.”

“But, good Lord!——” I began.

“Mr. Kesteven admits that he took the law into his own hands more than even a lawyer has any right to do, but he has produced excellent reasons for not calling us in to settle the business in proper order. He tried a new line of tactics. He hired men, too, and while the gang were besieging you, he was besieging *them*. He was ready, at the first signs of a scrap, to rush in and save you.”

“But when Terry slipped through——”

“He searched him. Naturally. His duty to his client, to recover his property, was his first consideration. But when he found that Mr. Rattigan hadn't the papers, and that you and Miss Lorimer were missing, his next thought was for your safety. At last he thought of the mine—he says he wonders he had never thought of it before. He went up there with his men, and found the gang in possession. He charged in on them and they

turned and—desperate and reckless of consequences at last—attacked him. He and his people had to fight for their lives. They'd just succeeded in putting the gang under when we turned up. They didn't recognise us at first, and one of his men foolishly fired at us, and then the row started and there was no stopping it."

"And Kesteven sneaked away?"

"With the papers, which it was his duty to recover and keep safe."

I sat back and thought. The ingenious effrontery of it all staggered me.

"Kesteven," I said at last, "is a lawyer. I take off my hat to him."

The inspector tapped his pencil against his teeth.

"I know. So do I. Can you upset that story of his in court, sir? You're welcome to try, if you like, but *I* can't—not with any hope of convincing a jury, and that, remember, is what we've got to do."

"Good Lord!" I said. "Then, what's the position?"

"Just this. There's no case over the death of Tresilian; no case over the death of Cecil Lorimer; no case over the death of Curly Sothern—I suspect one of Kesteven's men of doing that job, but I haven't a scrap of evidence: nobody was seen near the flats that night but yourself and Mr. Rattigan and a man who lived on Campden Hill, who was exercising his dog—nothing to do with the business at all, that I can see. Those of the gang we've got we can try on a good many charges—the

various assaults on you and your party, and being concerned in the deaths of one or two of Kesteven's men, and assault and battery there—oh, quite a good packet. We've got them all right, but they're only the hired men; the real criminals have gone where human justice can't touch them. These poor devils 'll get a good long stretch apiece, and that's all to the good. Keep 'em out of mischief. Mr. Kesteven and his crowd are quite ready to stand their trial for manslaughter of Bassett and Co., but of course they'll be acquitted. And there's an end of it, so far as we're concerned."

"It's pretty unsatisfactory," I complained.

"It may seem so to you, sir," he said coldly, "but half our work ends in disappointment: we catch our men, we get a certain amount of evidence, but we can't get the conviction we know the case deserves, because the most easily hoodwinked body o' men alive is a jury."

He paused and looked penetratingly at me, his eyes narrowed.

"But there's one thing I'd like to know, sir. I've had a party searching the country for those papers. They found a box similar to the one I understand they were contained in, but it was empty. Captain Carmichael, do you know anything about them?"

I hesitated. I could do nothing else. And I saw triumph creep into his eyes.

"You've got 'em, sir, or you know where they are, and I demand that you surrender them to the police."

"Look here, inspector," I said, "who is your first duty to?"

He looked surprised.

"Why, sir, the law."

"Not a bit of it. Your first duty, like mine, is to the country."

"Well, sir?"

"Now listen. I think you know all about me; you know I'm a public servant, like yourself. You know, I hope, that I wouldn't do a thing against the interests of the country, and I'd do a lot for it. You'll trust me that far?"

He hesitated a moment.

"Yes, sir, I admit that."

"Very well, then. Inspector, I'm no politician, and I don't suppose you are. But suppose these papers fell into your hands, and you found that they showed that a man whom the Government had put in charge of delicate financial negotiations with a foreign country, a man who was entrusted with Britain's honour and safety, was planning to sell his country into financial slavery, in order to feather his own nest—what would you do?"

"My duty would be to hand them to my superiors."

"Who could not possibly keep the thing dark. It would be bound to leak out, and there'd be a scandal that would do the country incalculable harm."

He stared at me, white-faced and incredulous.

"Is this the truth, sir?" he asked at last.

"By Almighty God, it is. What are you going to do?"

"But—but he ought to be shown up, sir."

"He can't, at present. You know about these negotiations that are going on. A scandal now would ruin everything, and make us the laughing stock of Europe."

He frowned anxiously.

"Yes, I see that. Well, what do you propose to do, sir?"

"Somebody," I said, "has got to see the man in question, tell him that the papers are in our hands, and that unless he finds a pretext for resigning from the committee at once, they will be made public."

"I see. A bluff."

"Perhaps. But one that he can't call. Anyway, can you yourself put up that bluff, inspector?"

He shook his head.

"No, sir. I can't."

"But I can. The question is—will you let me? Will you trust me to?"

There was a long silence. The inspector frowned and fidgeted, and tapped his pencil against his teeth. Then suddenly he rose to his feet and held out his hand.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, "from what I know of you, and after all you've been through on account of those papers, I can't do anything but believe you, and trust you. I'm satisfied that you're not in a position to surrender those papers to me, so—get on with it, sir, and good luck. By the way," he added,

"here's something I found on Vannion that may interest you."

From his notebook he extracted a piece of dirty and torn paper, the crumples of which had been carefully smoothed out. A glance showed me that it was the missing half of the clue; the half that the gang had taken from Cecil Lorimer. As I looked at it, I visualized the other half, the half we had burnt, and read the whole message—the message that was no longer of value to anyone.

*John have hidden papers in
weal Roseveare fifty
feet down north side go and
find them do what you think
best take care of my little girl
Br—————*

The inspector moved towards the door.

"By the way, sir," he said significantly, "I hadn't sufficient reason to detain Mr. Kesteven, so——"

"Good Lord!" I cried. "Do you mean he's loose?"

"Yes. I understand he's gone up to London."

I was out of bed in an instant.

"Inspector," I said, "for the love of Mike get hold of Mr. Rattigan and tell him I want him here at once—and some clothes. We've got to get a move on."

XLV

THERE was no doubt about it ; Rattigan could be a quick mover when he chose. Within twenty minutes he was in my room with half a dozen brown-paper parcels containing the best ready-made sartorial outfit that Redruth could supply at a moment's notice, and the information that a car was at the door ready to take us to London.

" 'Tis safer than going by train, I think, skipper," he said, " if that Kesteven fellah's loose. If he tries to chase us, we can shake him off. Brenda and Aunt Hattie are packing up," he added. " We'll pick them up as we go."

As I dressed, I gave him a rough outline of the inspector's theories. Rattigan listened in silence until I had finished. Then he said :

" He took a statement from me, too. I didn't quite know what to tell him, so I just gave him the truth, nothing but the truth, and very nearly the whole truth. I only kept my mouth shut about the papers."

" You did right, Ratty," I said. " And he knows about the papers now—at least he knows we've got them, and he's some idea what they are, and what we're going to do with them, and if he isn't exactly backing us up, at any rate he's not putting any spokes in our wheel."

" Well, now," Rattigan said, " what *are* we going to do with them? "

" We'll have to talk it over with Brenda, of course," I said, " but to my mind there's

only one thing to be done—we must tell this fellow that he's got to quit at once—or face the consequences of being shown up with all the publicity there is."

Rattigan nodded emphatically.

"That's the stuff, skipper. It'll take delicate handling, but we'll fix up a scheme all right. If you're ready, shall we trickle along?"

In the car, racing on our way to London, I put my proposal before Brenda—a Brenda very anxious as to whether I were in a fit condition to travel.

"Oh, yes," she said eagerly. "That's what poor daddy would have wanted done, isn't it?"

"I'm sure of that," I said. "Now we'll have to arrange a definite plan of action. I think, when we get to town, we'd better not go either to my flat or to Ealing; if Kesteven is really still on the warpath, he may find us and be a nuisance. We'll put up at a hotel."

As I spoke, another car shot past us, fast though we were travelling; the rush of it rattled our windows. Immediately Terry began to slow down, and as we stopped he clambered out of the driving seat, opened the door, and put his head in.

"See who that was?" he asked. "Mister Blasted Kesteven, and going like a bat out of hell. What do we do now, skipper?"

"If we can catch him up," I said, "we push him into the ditch. If not—look here, Terry, go into London by some other road, not the Great West, and make for the Corot Hotel, in Kensington Gore. It's not important

enough to be an easy guess, but big enough or our arrival not to be conspicuous."

"Righty ho," said Rattigan, and climbed back to his wheel.

We did not catch up with Mr. Kesteven—evidently he intended to be in London before us—and we felt convinced that we had shaken him off. We swung off the Great West Road at Slough, and making a detour by way of Beaconsfield, Rickmansworth, and Watford, entered London by way of the Edgware Road.

We enjoyed a very excellent dinner—the first for several evenings—at the Corot, and afterwards adjourned for a conference in the room that Rattigan and I shared. It was a large, pleasant, double-bedded room, high on the fifth floor, with low-silled windows opening outwards on to a view of the Park.

"My idea is this," I said. "We've got to clinch the business at once and take no chances. You, Terry, will go to the office of the *Daily Independent*, in Fleet Street, and sit there with the papers in your pocket. I'll go to Faulkner's town house and see him before he leaves for Westminster. If he agrees to our terms—and I bet he will—he'll come along to Fleet Street with me, sign a statement of his resignation in the editor's room, and we'll give him back his papers. If you don't hear from me in half an hour, Terry, give those papers to the editor—he'll know what to do with them all right."

I looked at the three faces before me: Terry's stolidly loyal; Brenda's sparkingly

enthusiastic ; even Aunt Hattie's dourly approving.

" Good," I said. " And now I propose bed. I'm sure we can all do with it ; I know I can."

Aunt Hattie and Brenda retired obediently. When they had gone I turned to Rattigan.

" Terry," I said. " I don't feel safe in sleeping. That fellow Kesteven's somewhere on our trail, I'm sure. It's difficult to believe that he could have traced us here, but he's such a wily devil, I'm not inclined to take any chances. We'll take the night in watches. I'll toss you who takes first."

And so we spent that night in four-hour spells of alternate alertness in a chair and repose in bed. Rattigan spent his time off duty sleeping like a child, but I scarcely dozed. I was still uneasy, and there was a great deal on my mind.

XLVI

BUT dawn came, and morning, with no sign of an intruder. Our precautions had been wasted ; there was no sign of Kesteven. Yet I knew that not until our task was finished would I feel that we were safe from him.

We breakfasted early, and to avoid going to my flat, Rattigan and I took a taxi first to Cox's and then to a shop famous for the cut of what it called " ready-to-wear suitings," and I fitted myself out with something a trifle

more correct for town wear than the Redruth reach-me-downs. Then we went on to Berkeley Street, where I dropped off and sent Terry on to Fleet Street.

Mr. Faulkner's butler informed me that the great man could not possibly see me without an appointment. With one eye on the approaching figure of a police constable, I took out a card, on which Terry had scribbled a few words for me—I could not write, with my bandaged hands—and said that if that were shown to Mr. Faulkner he would most certainly see me; the matter was, I explained, personal and highly confidential.

The card admitted me to the hall, brought out a highly polished secretary of some kind. He eyed my bandages askance, assured me suavely that Mr. Faulkner could not possibly see me, but that if I would state my business, he, the secretary, would do his best to secure an appointment for me.

"Look here," I said, "I know what your job is—to head off the few thousand cranks and crack-brains who want to see Mr. Faulkner every day. You've got to do your job—but I'm not one of the people you've got to head off. I'm only asking you to show Mr. Faulkner that card. If you refuse, I assure you, and I mean it, that you will be extremely sorry. This is a confidential matter, and one of the greatest importance to the Government. If Mr. Faulkner sees that card, he will see me at once—and will be exceedingly grateful to you for giving him the opportunity."

We argued for a little while, but in the end

I succeeded in convincing the fellow, and he went away, carrying my card as if he were afraid it might bite him. In a few moments he came back, astonishment in his eyes and obsequiousness in his voice. Mr. Faulkner, he said, would see me at once.

I found the financier sitting at a desk table by the window of a sombrely furnished room. He was a pale, bald man, with a flabby jowl and bright but slightly furtive eyes. He looked at me, particularly at my bandages, and in the depths of his eyes I saw uneasiness.

"Captain Carmichael?" he asked, with an attempt at affability that did not ring quite true. "What can I do for you?"

"I don't want to waste your valuable time, sir," I said, "so I won't beat about the bush. I have in my possession—not here on my person, but elsewhere—some papers that were lately in the possession of Andrew Tresilian. I think you know what they contain; indisputable evidence of your dealings in Inter-Imperial Stock and a few similar flotations; schemes in which you, without being suspected, swindled the public right and left. More, they contain evidence, in your own handwriting, of your intentions if you managed to get the chairmanship of this financial negotiating committee."

He relapsed against the back of his chair. He was trying hard to keep an impassive face, but his eyes were bulging and his lips twitched.

"I suppose you're trying to blackmail me," he snarled. "Well, it won't come off, my friend. There are no such papers, because

I had no such dealings." He stretched out a hand towards a bell.

"Then why," I shot out, "did you hire Kesteven to get them for you—at all costs, even murder."

I saw him start.

"Kesteven?" he blurted out. "What do you know about Kesteven? If you're an accomplice of his——"

"I'm nothing of the kind," I told him. "I wouldn't be seen dead in a ditch with him. But I know you set him to find those papers——"

"I did nothing of the kind." He moistened his dry lips with his tongue; his spatulate white hands were shaking. "If Kesteven was after those papers, it was to blackmail me worse than he has done already: he'll bleed me to death——" He stopped, realising what he had said.

"You needn't worry about Kesteven," I told him. "He hasn't got the papers, and he won't get them. I have them, and I'm willing to return them to you—on conditions."

He shot me a glance of vitriolic hate.

"You've read those papers you speak of?" he demanded.

I nodded.

"And you haven't the sense to realise that they're damnable forgeries?"

"If they are," I said, "they're still very interesting reading. The *Daily Independent* will be glad to publish them, as curiosities. A friend of mine is sitting in the *Independent* office now, with the papers in his pocket, and, if he doesn't hear from me within the

next twenty minutes, he's going to show them to the editor."

Faulkner jumped out of his chair.

"This is damned nonsense," he said. "I tell you those papers are forgeries. And in any case they can't be in your possession: they were lost three years ago."

"They were not lost," I said. "Tresilian had hidden them. When he came out of prison he picked them up again. He died, but not before he had handed them on to his brother-in-law. His brother-in-law died, but—I found the papers, and I've told you what I propose to do with them."

His lips curled back, showing his discoloured teeth.

"I've told you," he said slowly, "that those papers are forgeries." He said it in a tone that carried tremendous conviction; whatever his faults and vices, James Faulkner was a man of impressive personality. "But a man in my position can't afford to have even forgeries of that kind spread about—especially at the present time. So—I won't beat about the bush, either. What's your price, Captain Carmichael, for complete surrender of all those papers?"

I looked straight at him.

"Your resignation from this committee," I said.

I thought he would have leaped at my throat. His pale face went suddenly purple.

"You're crazy!" he said, thickly.

I shook my head.

"I wish I were. I hate to think of what will happen to the country if you're left to carry

on with your dirty work. I demand your resignation. I've come to see you privately, because I don't want to create an open scandal at the present time—not for your sake, but for the sake of the country's reputation. Only three other people alive know about those papers, and they won't say a word. But if you refuse—I've no option but to give this charming story to the newspapers."

He beat his clenched hands upon the desk before him.

"But I *can't* resign, now," he said. "How can I? What will people think?"

In that last sentence he betrayed both the weakness in his character and the weakness in his position.

"You will resign," I said, "on account of ill-health. If that strikes you as a pretty threadbare pretext—I suggest you stage a realistic heart attack in the *Independent* office."

He glowered at me sullenly: I could almost see, behind his eyes, his quick, resourceful brain searching desperately for a way out, and finding none.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, his voice suddenly smooth and oily. "You must surely realise that I can't possibly resign at a time like this. There's nobody else who can carry on these delicate negotiations. If I give you my word of honour to conduct these negotiations solely in Britain's interests, and with no profit to myself, and—suppose I sign a handsome cheque as a sort of guarantee of good faith——"

"No, thank you," I said. "If I took that cheque, you'd have me arrested for blackmail—

as you had Tresilian run in on a faked charge of embezzlement. I wouldn't trust your word of honour. As for the negotiations—the remaining members of the committee can carry on perfectly well. At the moment, they're your puppets; you've pulled the wool over their eyes as well as you have over the eyes of everyone else. But with you out of the way, they'll handle the business perfectly well. None of them may be as clever as you, but they are honest, and they'll work for the country's interests—not sell Britain for a bribe."

I saw his big teeth shut down on his lower lip; he was having a hard fight to keep his self-control.

"Time's getting on," I said. "You've only a few minutes left to make up your mind. Either you come to the *Independent* office with me, write an official announcement of your resignation for publication, and receive those documents, or—I give the whole story to the papers."

He licked his lips furtively.

"What guarantee have I?" he demanded, still fencing, "that you'll hold your tongue afterwards."

"The guarantee," I told him, "that if I spread a story like that without evidence, you could bring an action for libel—and you'd win." I paused for a moment and looked straight at him. "Well?" I challenged.

"No," he said. "You can go away and do your damndest."

"Thank you," I said, "I will." I've wondered, since, how I had the effrontery to say

what I said next, but the man infuriated me. And actually, I believe the sheer nerve of that last shot of mine decided the whole matter. "Do you mind," I asked, "if I use your telephone to ring up my friend at the *Independent* office and tell him to carry on?"

He gaped at me; his face was purple, his eyes protruded. I saw the veins on his forehead swell and a pulse beating in his thick neck. For a moment I thought he was going to make all my trouble unnecessary by having a stroke on the spot. I made a movement towards the bell to ring for help, but he waved me back with a jerky gesture. An inarticulate, guttural sound came from his lips. His hand flew to his collar, his fingers drew it away from his throat as if it were choking him. And then he spoke.

"Captain Carmichael," he said, "you win. I've met my match—at last. I give in. I'll come to Fleet Street with you, and when those papers are in my hands, I'll write my resignation. But, by God, I'll make you pay for this."

"Thank you," I said. "May I use your telephone to ring up my friend and tell him to stand by, because we're coming along?"

XLVII

EVERYBODY knows about the sensation caused by the sudden resignation of James Faulkner from the negotiating committee.

There is no need for me to say anything about that, or the triumphant conclusion of the international negotiations in the clean hands of honest men. But in the same issue of the paper that first gave the news—with an account of Faulkner's failing health that delighted Terry and me—we found a brief single-head paragraph that probably few people read and fewer still remembered after having read it. It merely stated that the man killed in the motor accident at Hounslow the previous night had been identified as Stanislaus Kesteven, until recently a member of the well-known legal firm of Leslie & Lucas, of Bedford Row.

XLVIII

THAT afternoon, Brenda and Aunt Hattie and Rattigan and I stood in the placid quietness of a London cemetery and watched a plain elm coffin being lowered into an open grave. The brass plate upon it bore the name of Cecil Lorimer and the date of his death.

Brenda was wonderful. Her lips were firm, her face icy calm ; only the tears that brimmed in her eyes, and the convulsive clutch of her fingers upon my arm, betrayed her suffering. Aunt Hattie's weather-beaten face was as expressionless as if it had been hacked out of wood, but as the handfuls of earth pattered on the coffin lid she turned with a sudden gesture and caught Brenda's other hand.

"Oh, my lamb!" she said chokingly. "Oh, my poor, poor lamb!" Then, as if ashamed of showing emotion, she drew herself up like a guardsman. "There's one thing you can comfort yourself with," she said: "you didn't fail him." She looked down into the grave. "Poor Cecil left a trust, and you've carried it through. Oh, he knows, my dear; he knows all about it, and he's thanking God for you three."

We stood there, looking at each other. There was nothing more to say or do. We turned away and began to walk across the shorn turf toward the distant gate.

Brenda still clung to my arm, and presently she looked up into my face.

"Oh, Uncle Jack," she said pitifully, "now poor daddy's gone—I've no one—you've got to take care of me now."

I squeezed her arm, but there was a sinking in my heart. The words I had heard at the pit mouth had been ringing in my brain ever since, but now, it seemed, she thought of me again only as "Uncle Jack," her father's friend, her guardian. Involuntarily I looked across at Rattigan. His clear, honest blue eyes met mine with an expression extraordinarily eloquent, for him. They said, quite plainly, as he would have said it in words: "If she'd have me, I'd be the happiest man on earth; but she's not for me—she's yours."

Aloud he said:

"Am I to be best man, Brenda, or shall I give the bride away?"

She gave a little choking sob, and looked up

at me. Our eyes met, and there was no need for words. Her hand slipped into mine, and side by side we walked toward the pulsing world that lay waiting for us beyond the gates.

THE END.



